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Repress or Defect: Military Defections in Syria in 1982 and 2011

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Abstract

This thesis investigates two events in modern Syrian history to understand military behavior under authoritarian regimes. It looks at and examines the behavior of the Syrian military in two cases: The Hama massacre of 1982, and the Syrian civil war from 2011 up until the end of 2012. The research studies how the same military, under similar conditions, could exhibit different behaviors when given orders of repression during anti-regime civil uprisings. The main research question tackled in the study is: why did large-scale military defections of out-group (Sunni) soldiers and officers occur in 2011 but not in 1982? Drawing on global literature on military loyalty and defections, as well as primary sources of the 2011 events, I focus on the nature of the two civil uprisings, and how they were perceived by the soldiers and officers of the Syrian military. The main results of investigation reflect on theories of ethnic stacking, military soldiers' grievances, and the nature of the civil uprisings as enabling or inhibiting factors to military defection. The results of the thesis will be particularly useful to reflect on military loyalties in an increasingly militarized world.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Zoltan Barany famously interjected: "to be able to make an educated guess regarding an army's response to an uprising, one must be familiar with the given context…There is no shortcut, no substitute for having an in-depth knowledge of the individual case"[1]. The aim of this thesis is to bring forth the idea that while leaders try to manipulate the military's structure or composition to 'guarantee' its loyalty, and specialists and scholars attempt to hypothesize how militaries would behave in different situations; military behavior is highly unpredictable and also context-based.

Throughout the course of history, many leaders and heads of states, in both democratic and authoritarian settings, have understood the necessity of military loyalty. For democratic heads of states, "a democratic society would not remain viable if the members of its military had the capacity to disobey at will what they have been asked to do, since they are organized and in possession of almost all weapons of the state"[2]. As for authoritarian leaders, without military loyalty, coups would be more likely to happen and anti-regime civil uprisings more likely to succeed. Being able to exercise control over the military institution is a main concern of any state leader regardless of the nature of the state. This is due to the fact that military disloyalty, in all its shapes and forms, has the power to make or break regimes as well as entire societies.

The focus of this thesis is on one main type of disloyal military behavior in particular: military defection during anti-authoritarian civil uprisings. Many scholars who have researched and written on military defection in civil uprisings have attempted to provide answers to the question

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[1] Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 18.
[2] Jean-Francois Caron, *Disobedience in the Military: Legal and Ethical Implications* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

of why militaries sometimes proceed with repression, while at other times they defect. This thesis follows in a similar view and focuses on two episodes of 1982 and 2011 Syria. The reasoning behind choosing Syria is two-fold. First, the way that the Syrian military split starting 2011 is unique. This opens the door to filling an existing research gap by investigating whether this unique split has precedence. Second, the civil war that erupted in 2011 is still ongoing. There are many reasons as to why that is the case; however, one main reason is the split of the Syrian military. The militarization of the opposition, which came with the defection of many soldiers and officers, has resulted in more than a decade long civil war. It is necessary to understand the underlying reasoning that led to these drastic results and their historical roots.

1.1: Research Question and Argument

This thesis aims to examine military defections in Syria in 1982 and in 2011 up until late 2012. The way that the Syrian military split starting 2011 has led to the development of a particular curiosity regarding whether defections of this scope have previously taken place. Choosing the case of Hama in 1982, known as the Hama massacre, as the uprising of comparison, the findings show that the behavior of the Syrian military in 1982 was very different than its behavior in 2011. The question that this thesis aims to examine is why.

Why did large-scale military defections of out-group (Sunni) soldiers and officers occur in 2011 but not in 1982?

The nature of the Syrian military, as being stacked in a sectarian manner, makes it so that the higher ranks of the military or security forces are reserved for those who share the same sectarian

affiliation as that of the head of state (in-group); as opposed to the lower ranks that automatically go to those who do not share the same sectarian affiliation as those in power (out-group). Such a structure is meant to minimize the occurrence of coups, something that Syria has been plagued with for years. By placing Alawites (in-group) in the higher ranks of the military, the chances of them initiating a coup to topple the Alawite regime are minimized. Furthermore, they are more likely to stick with the regime and follow orders in face of domestic unrest that attempts to topple that regime. However, what this structure does is that it leads to the alienation and the marginalization of the out-group soldiers and officers (Sunnis). As a result, grievances amongst the out-group soldiers and officers start to develop, making them more likely to defect in the context of a civil uprising. However, military defections cannot be explained through the lens of grievances alone, it would be misleading to do so. This has to do with the fact that defection from the military is a very risky venture, as it is a crime that is punishable by the death penalty, even in the most democratic of states. As a result, there is a need to acknowledge the importance of one crucial factor: the nature of the civil uprising in question and how it is perceived by the soldiers and officers.

The argument posed in this thesis is that military defections in the context of 1982 did not occur, or were limited in scope, as opposed to the large-scale defections of 2011, is due to the different natures of the civil uprisings in both cases and how the uprisings were perceived by the military. The uprising of 2011 was seen, or perceived, as more likely to succeed due to certain elements it possessed. It was a peaceful and popular movement that had a huge base of support. Furthermore, the successful uprisings of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt that witnessed the downfall of two dictators, where the people were protesting against many of the same things that

the Syrian people themselves were protesting against, gave the people hope that Bashar al-Assad would be next in line. In addition, the reaction of the international community bolstered the perception that the regime's days are numbered. On the other hand, the uprising of 1982 was violently ideological, lacked a huge base of support, received no support or acknowledgement from the international community, and it only targeted, or appealed to, a small fraction of the population. All of this made it seem as less likely to succeed in bringing about the collapse of the regime. The perceived success versus failure of the two civil uprisings mentioned here is crucial to look at when discussing military defections due to the fact that if an uprising were to fail, the defecting soldier(s) would be captured and put to death as soon as the regime forces are done quelling the uprising. However, if an uprising is seen to be likely successful, then the risk of being captured and punished is reduced; thus, making defection a more likely occurrence.

Of course, it has to be noted that this argument has its limitations. There are indeed other factors that could answer the question that this thesis poses. One such factor could be the fact that there were a lot less Sunnis in the Syrian military in the 1980s than in 2011. However, playing the devil's advocate, even if the number of Sunnis in the Syrian military was higher in 1982, large-scale defections still would not have taken place. As will be shown throughout this thesis, the Sunnis of Syria did not support the violent rhetoric and actions of the Muslim Brotherhood, on the contrary, they despised it even more than they despised the Alawite regime. Furthermore, the uprising itself failed to garner the needed broad base of civilian support, making it less likely to succeed in bringing about any real change.

1.2: Significance of Research

The general literature available on military defection in civil uprisings is limited, mostly focusing on the cases of the Arab Spring and a few select cases in Africa. This thesis aims to add to the field of military defection by introducing a new case that has not been thoroughly examined before. The Hama massacre of 1982 is one of the most understudied historic events. The literature found on the general topic is rather limited[3]. Furthermore, to date, there exists no research that has been conducted specifically on military defections in Hama 1982. All that exists are references in articles or books[4]. What this thesis does is that it compiles these different references and attempts to make sense of what they say and what they mean. This will help shed light onto the behavior of the Syrian military in what came to be known as one of the bloodiest crackdowns committed by an Arab leader against his people.

As for military defections in Syria in 2011, much of the literature available tries to make sense of these defections by looking at how the militaries of other Arab countries behaved in 2011. While doing so has resulted in a wide array of theories regarding why soldiers defect instead of remain with the regime during times of civil unrest, it is rather important to look at how the Syrian military itself behaved in previous situations. Furthermore, a lot of the literary works on how the Syrian military behaved in 2011 tend to make erroneous statements such as, for example, Khedr Khaddour's misleading title, *"Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal"*[5]. Such a statement fails to acknowledge the full picture, and the fact that

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[3] Few scholarly works exist that purely focus on the Hama massacre of 1982. Patrick Seale's book, Aaron Lund's scholarly work, and Raphael Lefevre's book to name a few.
[4] These references will be examined in Chapter 4, section 4.2.
[5] Kheder Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal", *Carnegie Middle East Center* (2015)

"militaries are not unified actors"[6]; it only takes into consideration one side of the story. Furthermore, it mistakenly makes a generalization regarding the state of the Syrian military. This thesis dismantles this inaccurate narrative and sheds light onto the reality of how the Syrian military actually behaved starting 2011.

The question that this thesis poses has not been fully explored in previous works, nor has it been phrased in such a manner as to draw attention to the stark difference in the behavior of the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military in the cases of 1982 and 2011. This thesis juxtaposes these two events in modern Syrian history in order to provide a more holistic picture as to why the same military, under similar conditions, could exhibit such different behaviors when faced with orders to repress a civil uprising. Doing so will aid in better understanding of military behavior and its drivers.

1.3: Methodology

This thesis relied on qualitative research, specifically content analysis of primary and secondary sources, both Arabic and English, as the main mode of research. The reasoning behind choosing this type of research is simple. "When little is known about a phenomenon or existing research is limited, qualitative research is a very useful research methodology because it is exploratory – its purpose is to discover new ideas and insights, or even generate new theories"[7]. The first case this thesis examines, the case of 1982, is an understudied moment in history. Furthermore, as mentioned, the general research available on military defection is quite limited. As a result,

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[6] Dorothy Ohl and Holger Albrecht, "Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior During Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes", *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no.1 (2016): 48.
[7] Juanita Heigham and Robert Croker, *Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics: A Practical Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 9.

qualitative research presented itself as a useful tool that aided in the process of answering the complex question this thesis poses. It has to be noted that the case of Syria in specific presents itself as a challenging case, especially the first case of examination, the uprising of 1982. Reports on the inner workings of the military and the grievances of the out-group at the time are very limited. As for 2011, while there is definitely more data available, it is still also quite limited and insufficient. As a result, it has to be highlighted that the analysis in this thesis is based on the limited number of sources found, which will be presented in the following chapters.

Primary sources:

The first type of primary source this thesis relied on for analysis is newspapers. These include Al-Ahram, Al-Thawra, The New York Times, Reuters, BBC, and CNN just to name a few. Newspapers provide first-hand accounts of events taking place, which helped with the construction of the narratives of the two cases of 1982 and 2011 in chapters Four and Five. This helped with the painting of a vivid picture of the chain of events that took place over the course of both "events". By knowing how the chains of events played out in both cases, it became an easier task to understand the context, what was happening on the ground in both cases. This ultimately aided in the formulation of the last piece of the puzzle in the two cases: the nature of the civil uprisings and how they were perceived. Second, this thesis also relied on the analysis of several interviews conducted by news media outlets, such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya for example, as well as published interviews found in scholarly articles and books. These interviews were used to gain a firsthand account of the events that took place in both cases. They were also used to gain insight to the grievances of the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military. This, then, helped with the better understanding of their behavior.

This thesis also relied extensively on the analysis of several secondary sources such as books, dissertations, and academic or scholarly articles found in online electronic journals. These sources provided significant and detailed research on the structure and composition of the Syrian military throughout the decades. This laid down the building blocks necessary for the later understanding of grievances and defection. Furthermore, these sources were also utilized throughout Chapter Four and Chapter Five in order to lay out the background information necessary for understanding the two cases.

1.3.1: Periodization

It has to be noted that the 1982 uprising itself began and ended over a span of almost three weeks. Many could argue that the start date of the uprising was actually 1979, since the massacre of 1982 was only just a culmination of a long series of events. While this thesis acknowledges such an argument, when discussing military defection this thesis focuses only on the examination of the events of 1982. The events of 1979 up until 1982 could better be described as sporadic violent attacks on the Brotherhood's part; however, the call for a mass general uprising was issued in February 1982 by the local commander of the Brotherhood in Hama; and that is why this thesis focuses on 1982 alone as the single moment of examination of military defection. As for the Syrian civil war that erupted in 2011, it is still ongoing. As a result, there was a need to decide on a cut-off point. The reasoning behind choosing the end of 2012 as the cut-off point for the second case is due to the reason that by the end of 2012, the Free Syrian Army, the main defectors group, started diminishing in number and influence. This was due to the rise of a wide array of different groups, including jihadist and extremist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and

ISIS; which changed the entire course of the war. With promises of offering better weaponry, equipment, and protection, these groups managed to alter the scope of defections, where many soldiers started defecting to them[8]. Defections to these groups, especially in the context of the Syrian civil war, is beyond the scope of this study due to the fact that these particular defections are an entirely different phenomenon than the one this study focuses on.

1.4: Thesis Outline

This thesis is divided into six chapters, with the first chapter being the introductory chapter of the thesis. Chapter Two lays down the main theories and concepts that will be utilized throughout this thesis. Chapter Three provides a historical overview of the Syrian military, delving deeper into how it became stacked in a sectarian manner, and the different consequences that resulted from such a structure. Chapter Four examines the first case, the Hama massacre of 1982, its triggers, and the events that spiraled over the course of its duration. It analyzes how the Syrian military, especially the out-group soldiers and officers, behaved. It also looks at the nature of the uprising and how it was perceived as a result, in order to explain such behavior. Chapter Five presents the second case, the Syrian civil war. It follows the same structure as Chapter Four, beginning with the causes and the triggers of the uprising of 2011, followed by an analysis of how the military, the out-group soldiers and officers in particular, behaved. It then delves into the analysis of the nature of the uprising, the different elements it possessed, and how it was perceived in order to explain the behavior of the out-group soldiers and officers. Finally, Chapter Six concludes the thesis by summarizing the findings of the two cases analyzed.

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[8] Theodore McLauchlin, *Desertion: Trust and Mistrust in Civil Wars* (London: Cornell University Press, 2020), 172.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter will look at and examine several different concepts related to military loyalty and disloyalty. It will delve deeper into the understanding of coup-proofing strategies, with a special focus on one strategy in particular: ethnic or sectarian stacking, in order to understand how military loyalty is sometimes forced or imposed by those in power. Attempting to force military loyalty however, could result in several undesirable consequences, in grievances that become deeply-rooted. By comprehending how these grievances come about, it becomes easier to understand how they impact military behavior. Grievances play a large role in motivating military personnel to engage in disloyal behavior, bringing the discussion to address one behavior in particular that is the core of this thesis: military defection during civil uprisings. Military defection is influenced by many different factors; however, this thesis emphasizes one factor in particular: how the civil uprising in question is perceived by these units and how their consequent behavior is based on the different elements that uprisings possess.

2.1: Military Loyalty and Disloyalty

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word *loyalty* is defined as "a strong feeling of support or allegiance"[9]. For the purpose of this thesis, the focus is on military loyalty, the loyalty of the military institution to those in power. This section will delve deeper into the understanding of military loyalty and disloyalty. The several concepts reviewed in the following sections of this chapter are all subsumed under this particular framework.

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[9] Oxford English Dictionary.

Serving as a soldier in the armed forces, there are certain 'requirements' that come along with the job. One of these 'requirements' is loyalty. This has to do with the fact that "there is no institution more important for a regime's survival than its armed forces and, therefore, maintaining the unquestioned loyalty of those forces ought to be a priority of the ruling elites"[10]. To any leader or head of state around the world, not just authoritarian leaders, the loyalty of the military is vital; and that is for several different reasons. First, "'loyalty' is paramount for military success"[11]. For wars to be won, soldiers and officers need to be loyal to those that rule over them. Furthermore, military loyalty is "central to both military professionalism and stable civil-military relations"[12]. For stable governance to last and for societies to continue to operate in peace, the military institution has to stay in check, it has to be subjugated and loyal to those in power. These statements all point to the importance of the loyalty of the military to those in power.

The concept of loyalty could be understood as a paradox. While loyalty is indeed a noble quality for a person to possess, it could be argued that it sometimes requires this person to commit acts that are viewed, by many, as being morally wrong. This could be highlighted by looking at military loyalty for example. Military loyalty "transcends the normal parameters of loyalty by requiring the duty to act with integrity and demanding actions that may be morally wrong, such as taking the life of another"[13]. Military loyalty entails obedience, the following of orders issued

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[10] Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 9.
[11] Christoph Dworschak, "Jumping on the Bandwagon: Differentiation and Security Defection during Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no.7-8 (2020): 1336.
[12] Maggie Dwyer and Oisin Tansey, "Explaining Divergent Trends in Coups and Mutinies: The End of the Cold War and the Role of Military Agency", *Security Studies* 29, no.5 (2021): 2.
[13] Issac Gipson, "Loyalty and the Military Profession", *Air War College* (2017): 23.

by those in power. When a leader instructs his soldiers in the military to invade, conquer, or attack, these men are expected to obey without hesitation. Not doing so is considered an act of dissent, it is considered being disloyal. Even if the reasons for disobeying orders are ethical and moral, the act of refusing to follow orders is still viewed as an act of disloyalty. While soldiers are encouraged to act with integrity and speak up if they are ever given illegal orders, there exists a very big difference between illegal and wrong. When a leader instructs his soldiers to kill, this is not an illegal act. It is morally and ethically wrong; however, what would be illegal in this scenario is the soldiers refusing to obey his superior's orders. Furthermore, in authoritarian states, this is rarely ever the case. Speaking up on its own could be viewed as a disloyal act.

"Historically, the most terrible things – war, genocide, and slavery – have resulted not from disobedience, but from obedience"[14]. Indeed, if one contemplates the aforementioned statement, for 'terrible things' like war or mass murder to occur, it requires men who are both capable and willing to take part in such acts. Frederick the Great, former King of Prussia once said, "if my soldiers were to begin to think, not one of them would remain in the army"[15]. To heads of states around the world, their soldiers are not meant to think, they are meant to act, to execute orders given to them without questioning them, even if they disagree with the nature of these orders. This type of loyalty however, the blind obedience to orders, is not a guarantee. At the end of the day, soldiers are human, driven by many of the things that most humans are driven by such as their emotions, perceptions, ideals, and surrounding environments. This leads to the conclusion

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[14] Howard Zinn, *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), 389.
[15] Reg Grant, *Soldier* (London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2007), 140.

that no matter how hard leaders try to 'ensure' military loyalty; it is not something that could be guaranteed. This, however, does not stop state leaders from actually trying to do so.

2.2: Authoritarian Regimes and Coup-Proofing

Over the decades, authoritarian leaders have begun to understand the many different obstacles that could come to stand in their way or threaten their rule. If one deeply ponders the question of what exactly it is that could threaten the rule of a dictator, two immediate answers present themselves: a coup d'état, and a national popular uprising from below. Delving deeper into the latter, to a dictator who uses force against his own people, a popular uprising could very well be quelled by the military, if and only if the loyalty of the military as an institution, as a whole, is guaranteed. In other words, "a regime's repressive capacity is contingent upon the loyalty of troops"[16]. With this line of thinking, military disloyalty, in all its forms, truly ends up being an authoritarian leader's kryptonite.

The threat of the military rising up against the regime is something that has loomed, and continues to loom, over the heads of the rulers of the different authoritarian states around the world. Focusing the discussion on the Middle East, according to James Quinlivan "between March 1949 (the first coup after World War II) and the end of 1980, fifty-five coups were attempted in Arab states – half of them successful"[17]. This has led the leaders of these different states to adopt measures that would ensure and safeguard their position as heads of states; measures that would ensure that the military would never dare, nor be able to rise up against the regime and topple it in the process. These measures are subsumed under the umbrella of what is

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[16] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 337.
[17] James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East", *International Security* 24, no.2 (1999): 133.

known as coup-proofing. "As Arab regimes developed their civil-military relations during the 1970s to achieve the goal of regime stability and continuity, they created a blend of coup-proofing mechanisms in that path. Such coup-proofing mechanisms played major role in reaching such goal"[18]. This section will delve deeper into the examination of what coup-proofing is, the different forms it could take on, its effectiveness, and the consequences it could result in.

According to Quinlivan, coup-proofing is defined as "the set of actions a regime takes to prevent a military coup"[19]. Furthering this point, Jonathan Powell states that these actions could focus on either limiting the ability of the military, or on limiting the willingness of the military to initiate a coup[20]. In other words, according to Michael Makara, coup-proofing strategies "subordinate the armed forces to a country's political leadership, structuring civil-military relations in a way that reduces both their ability and willingness to challenge the political status quo"[21]. Coup-proofing strategies are numerous, including: "the establishment of strong personal loyalty between officers and incumbents through ethnic, religious and personal bonds; divided security apparatuses, pitting regular armed forces against militias and special security forces; the frequent rotation of officers to avoid the emergence of alternative power centres; and buying off the officer corps by granting them economic privileges and opportunities for self-enrichment"[22]. Despite the variety of choices, it has to be noted that "coup-proofing strategies are strongly path-

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[18] Mohaned Al-Hamdi, "Civil-military relations, coup-proofing, and militaries in the Arab Spring", *PhD. Dissertation* (Kansas State University, 2020), 23.
[19] James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East", *International Security* 24, no.2 (1999): 133.
[20] Jonathan Powell, "Coups and Conflict: The Paradox of Coup-Proofing", *PhD. Dissertation* (University of Kentucky, 2012).
[21] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): 335.
[22] Holger Albrecht, "Does Coup-Proofing Work? Political-Military Relations in Authoritarian Regimes amid the Arab Uprisings", *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no.1 (2015): 39.

dependent. The coup-proofing strategies available to leaders are limited by social structure, resources, history, regime dynamics, and external influences"[23]. In other words, the strategy, or combination of strategies, chosen by a leader is not based on a whim. Many elements factor into the decision of how a leader coup-proofs his military. However, regardless of the strategy or combination of strategies chosen, the end goal is to minimize the risk that the military would rise up against the regime in an attempt to topple it. This happens by, as best put by Makara, "coup-proofing strategies [which] are intended to bind the security apparatus to the ruling regime to such an extent that the two become mutually dependent on one another"[24]. By making the military reliant on the continuity of the regime, a leader guarantees that the military wouldn't attempt to cross him; in other words, he guarantees the military's loyalty.

With all the work that authoritarian leaders put in to coup-proof their militaries, it is important to look at and examine the effectiveness of coup proofing strategies. The extensive body of literature available offers two different, yet valid, points of view. On one hand, according to Powell, "coup-proofing has been found to effectively deter coups"[25]. Powell explains that this happens because coup-proofing strategies are "expected to deter plotters through the creation of coordination challenges, thus lowering the probability of success"[26]. However, with the deliberate creation of those 'coordination challenges', coup-proofing ends up having, according

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[23] Mohaned Al-Hamdi, "Civil-military relations, coup-proofing, and militaries in the Arab Spring", *PhD. Dissertation* (Kansas State University, 2020): 19.

[24] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): 337.

[25] Jonathan Powell, "Leader Survival Strategies and the Onset of Civil Conflict: A Coup-Proofing Paradox", *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no.1 (2017): 30.

[26] Jonathan Powell, "Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups D'état", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no.6 (2012): 1024.

to Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "a negative impact on military effectiveness"[27]. They go on to explain that this happens because "coup-proofing limits soldiers' leadership skills and initiative, and undermines coordination between different military units"[28]. This is the price that an authoritarian leader has to sometimes pay when deciding to utilize coup-proofing strategies. "In short, leaders will sacrifice their military capabilities in order to reduce the likelihood of being toppled in a military coup"[29]. On the other hand, and in line with the aforementioned challenges presented by coup-proofing, it could be argued that coup-proofing could lead to coups. The limitations placed on the military institution through coup-proofing could lead to the development of grievances among the officers, driving them to organize a coup to overthrow the regime. In the words of Jun Sudduth: "if political leaders are taking actions that will reduce the military's ability to organize a coup, it is rational for the officers to launch a coup and replace those leaders immediately, before they lose their coup-making capabilities"[30]. While both viewpoints presented are valid, one conclusion could be drawn. Coup-proofing strategies do not come without their 'baggage', or associated risks. While they could provide protection for the leader from being toppled in a coup, these strategies "remain ineffective at preventing other forms of military insubordination"[31]. In fact, they could sometimes provoke military personnel to behave in a disloyal manner, as will be shown in the following sections. Such a risk is gladly taken by the different heads of states who choose to coup-proof their militaries, as long as their position remains safeguarded.

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[27] Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no.4 (2011): 347.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Jonathan Powell, "Coups and Conflict: The Paradox of Coup-Proofing", *PhD. Dissertation* (University of Kentucky, 2012): 8.
[30] Jun Sudduth, "Coup risk, coup-proofing and leader survival", *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no.1 (2016): 5.
[31] Holger Albrecht, "Military Insubordination in Popular Mass Uprisings", *Political Science Quarterly* 134, no.2 (2019): 308.

2.3: Ethnic Stacking

As mentioned in the previous section, authoritarian leaders have a wide array of choices to pick from when deciding on how to coup-proof their militaries in order to 'guarantee' their loyalty. The focus however, is on one particular strategy: ethnic stacking, also referred to as sectarian stacking. This section will delve deeper into understanding what ethnic stacking is, how it works, the different forms it could take on, and finally the many different consequences that it could result in.

According to Julien Laflamme and Theodore McLauchlin, ethnic stacking is the "practice of recruiting and promoting members of certain communal groups seen as more loyal, called in-groups, within the security forces"[32]. Providing more depth to the aforementioned definition, Pilster and Bohmelt state that "state leaders fearing coups tend to intervene in recruitment, promotion, and assignment procedures. They exploit family, ethnic, or religious loyalties for recruiting soldiers to gain insurance against coups"[33]. Ethnic stacking takes on a wide array of different forms; it all mainly depends on the head of state's preferred mode of stacking. According to Kristen Harkness, "ethnic stacking range[s] from ethnically manipulating the highest ranks of the command hierarchy to creating elite coethnic paramilitary units, to conditioning all service on shared ethnicity"[34]. Also focusing on the different modalities of stacking, Nathaniel Allen and Risa Brooks "unpack stacking" by explaining the different forms

[32] Julien Laflamme and Theodore McLauchlin, "The Efficacy of Ethnic Stacking: Military Defection during Uprisings in Africa", *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no.4 (2020): 697.

[33] Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no.4 (2011): 335.

[34] Kristen Harkness, "The Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset: When leaders use ascriptive identity to build military loyalty", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no.5 (2022): 609.

that ethnic stacking could take on[35]. For example, they explain how in Bahrain the entire military (both officers and soldiers) is made up of Sunnis, those belonging to the same religious sect as the ruling family. On the other hand, in Syria, for example, ethnic stacking takes on a different form where the majority of the higher ranks of the military are occupied by Alawites (those of the same sect as the head of state), while the rank-and-file soldiers are mostly Sunnis. At the end of the day however, as best put by Harkness, the concept of ethnic stacking "fundamentally hinges on "ethnic matching" between the head of state and their coercive institutions, which generates loyalty"[36]. As previously mentioned, coup-proofing strategies are meant to bind the fates of the regime and the military together; and since ethnic stacking is a coup-proofing strategy, it is meant to do just that. By manipulating the ethnic or sectarian makeup of the military, an authoritarian leader minimizes the chances of a coup being initiated to overthrow him. Blood runs thicker than water, and with such line of thinking, military personnel belonging to a leader's own ethnic or sectarian group are less likely to initiate, or join, a coup meant to overthrow him.

Looking at Harkness's work on ethnically stacked militaries in Africa, when the time came for the different African states to gain their independence, their leaders chose to adopt a strategy that was set forth by the British colonial power. They chose to rely on "mechanisms of ethnic patronage and ethnic affinity to ensure political reliability [where] they conditioned military recruitment and promotion on shared ethnicity"[37]. Similarly, according to Mohaned Talib, "in the

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[35] Nathaniel Allen and Risa Brooks, "Unpacking 'Stacking': Researching Political Identity and Regime Security in Armed Forces", *Armed Forces & Society* 49, no.1 (2022).
[36] Kristen Harkness, "The Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset: When leaders use ascriptive identity to build military loyalty", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no.5 (2022): 610.
[37] Kristen Harkness, "The Ethnic Army and the State: Explaining Coup Traps and the Difficulties of Democratization in Africa", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no.4 (2016): 593.

Third World countries, in general, and Arab countries, in particular, the role of ethnicity, sect, tribe, and family remains important on different levels of the armed forces. The degree of loyalty to the denomination or the tribe, in some militaries, precedes the loyalty to the state or the military"[38]. This all works to show how ethnic, sectarian, religious, and tribal identities, when manipulated properly, serve as powerful tools for leaders to ensure their militaries' loyalty. This, however, ends up creating an atmosphere where, according to Michael Makara, shared identity becomes "an indicator of loyalty to the regime"[39]; and anyone not sharing said identity is automatically viewed as being less loyal, as an 'outsider'.

As previously mentioned, many elements factor in the head of state's decision on which coup-proofing strategy, or strategies, to utilize. The same could be said about the decision regarding *how* to ethnically stack the military. For example, the way that the militaries of the aforementioned cases of Syria and Bahrain are stacked, is based on the nature of their societies. According to Joseph Keel, "a factionalized social fabric gifts dictators access to arguably the most powerful coup-proofing strategy: the ability to appoint members of one's own primordial group to critical positions within the regime"[40]. Looking at Syria and Bahrain's 'social fabrics' for example, they are heavily factionalized and divided along sectarian lines. This is further exacerbated by the fact that, in both cases, the minority rules over the majority. Such a structure is problematic for the ruling elite in the sense that there will always be the threat of the majority rising up in an attempt to reverse the power structure that places the minority on top. As a result,

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[38] Mohaned Al-Hamdi, "Civil-military relations, coup-proofing, and militaries in the Arab Spring", *PhD. Dissertation* (Kansas State University, 2020): 72.

[39] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): 337.

[40] Joseph Keel, "Standing Down: The Logic of Security Force Defection", *PhD Dissertation* (University of Oxford: 2021), 46.

ethnic stacking again presents itself as a useful tool for leaders to ensure their militaries' loyalty in case that were to ever happen. According to Makara, "the notion of a besieged minority group – and they are almost always minorities – in need of regime protection is the key mechanism through which the communal strategy operates"[41]. By painting those who do not share the same ethnic or sectarian identity as the leader as a threat, the leader rallies the support and unconditional loyalty of the soldiers who do share the same ethnic, sectarian, or tribal identity as him. This, however, does not happen without consequences.

2.3.1: Side Effects – Grievances

Ethnic stacking makes it so that members belonging to one particular sect, or group, are more privileged than the others. This privilege entails higher rankings, better opportunities, better social standing, and essentially more power. It is crucial to note that these privileges come at the expense of the marginalization of members belonging to other groups. The advantaged group, in this case, would then be the one that shares the same ethnicity or sect affiliation as the ones in power; while the disadvantaged group(s) will be the one(s) that does not. This brings the discussion back to Laflamme and McLauchlin's definition of ethnic stacking. Laflamme and McLauchlin use the word 'in-group' to denote the advantaged group, those who share the same ethnic or sectarian affiliation as the head of state. Their definition of ethnic stacking goes on to state that "this favoritism harms communal groups seen as less loyal, called out-groups"[42], referring to the group(s) not sharing the same ethnic or sect affiliation as the ones in power. What ethnic stacking does is that it ends up giving rise to a patrimonial military force, "one which is

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[41] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): 337.
[42] Julien Laflamme and Theodore McLauchlin, "The Efficacy of Ethnic Stacking: Military Defection during Uprisings in Africa", *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no.4 (2020): 697.

closely tied to the regime either through family, tribal or ideological ties or other form of politicization, and is characterized by a high degree of favoritism and corruption"[43]. According to Eva Bellin, instead of having a military force where advancement is based on hard work and effort, advancement in ethnically stacked militaries is "governed by cronyism and political loyalty rather than merit"[44]. This ends up creating, in the words of McLauchlin, "a durable cleavage between in-group and out-group"[45]. This opens the door for the development of grievances among the out-group soldiers and officers.

According to Philip Roessler, "the problem with ethnic stacking or other discretionary appointments, [however], is that they can be perceived as a conspiracy on the part of the ruler and his allies to build a "shadow state" in order to monopolize wealth and power at the expense of other elites. This leaves those excluded from the shadow state unable to monitor the distribution of patronage and control of coercion and increases their fears that in the future, as the shadow state becomes stronger, they could be completely marginalized from power or face an even worse fate, such as arrest of liquidation"[46]. Also addressing the consequences of ethnic stacking, Makara states that "over time, the identification gap between the privileged community of trust and the rest of society becomes reified as the disadvantaged majority grows to resent what it perceives to be institutional discrimination on the basis of communal ties"[47]. In other

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[43] Derek Lutterbeck, *Arab Uprisings and Armed Forces: Between Openness and Resistance* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2011): 17.
[44] Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring", *Comparative Politics* 44, no.2 (2012): 133.
[45] Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion", *Comparative Politics* 42, no.3 (2010): 333.
[46] Philip Roessler, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa", *World Politics* 63, no.2 (2011): 309-310.
[47] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): 337.

words, "being deprived of promotion possibilities tends to increase grievances, and reduce soldiers' preference for the sitting regime"[48]. These grievances however, they stay hidden due to the fact that the nature of ethnic stacking as a strategy does not allow for the expression of those grievances. In other words, who would out-group soldiers and officers complain to? Furthermore, if a soldier or officer of the out-group decides to take his grievances to those in power (in-group), this could backfire on the soldier or officer with the complaint. This could lead to him being viewed in a suspicious light, or maybe even surveilled. As a result, the grievances stay hidden with no outlet for expression. However, these grievances end up acting as motivators of military disloyalty, influencing soldiers and officers to behave in disloyal manners if there ever is an opportunity to do so.

2.4: Military Defection

Coups are not the only manifestation of military disloyalty. Disobeying or shirking orders, deserting, and defecting are a few examples of the many ways that military personnel could portray disloyalty. The focus of this thesis, however, is on military defections. One hallmark of authoritarian regimes is their ability to order the use of brutal force against civilian protesters if they ever decide to speak up and demand change. The institutions tasked with carrying out such orders are the security forces and the military. In a situation where the military is loyal to the regime, the military will follow orders and crush the uprising. However, in a different situation, the military could refuse to obey such orders, and decide to defect. This section will focus on

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[48] Marianne Dahl, "Military Defection: How coup-proofing strategies increase the likelihood of military defection", *PRIO Policy Brief* 18 (2016): 3.

defining what military defection is, the different forms it could take on, and the gravity of its consequences.

According to Marianne Dahl, "military defection, or security force defection, takes place when members of the security forces desert, instead of fighting for the regime, leaving the military and the conflict site, or leaving the military and joining forces with the opposition"[49]. This definition, while wholesome, is very broad. Furthermore, similar to a lot of the literature available on military defection, it mistakenly lumps together desertion and defection; however, it has to be noted that these two are very different phenomena. This leads to the need to specify what this thesis means when referring to defections. This thesis will adopt the definition provided by Christoph Dworschak to define defection, where he defines military defection as: "part of the security apparatus breaks away from the government and actively sides with the opposition movement"[50]. In other words, as referred to by Philipp Lutscher, "switch[ing] sides"[51]. As Dworschak explains, "defections require an active opposition to which the soldier(s) can defect to"[52]. The context here, then, is military defections during anti-authoritarian civil uprisings.

The defection of the military during times of civil uprisings is a threat to any leader or head of state around the world, especially authoritarian heads of states who rely on the military to stay in power. This is due to the fact that, in the words of Lenin, "no revolution of the masses can

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Christoph Dworschak, "Jumping on the Bandwagon: Differentiation and Security Defection during Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no.7-8 (2020): 1337.

[51] Philipp Lutscher, "The More Fragmented the Better? – The Impact of Armed Forces Structure on Defection during Nonviolent Popular Uprisings", *International Interactions* 42, no. 2 (2016): 351.

[52] Christoph Dworschak, "Jumping on the Bandwagon: Differentiation and Security Defection during Conflict", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no.7-8 (2020): 1338.

triumph without the help of a portion of the armed forces that sustained the old regime"[53]. For anti-authoritarian civil uprisings to succeed, military defection is key. The reasoning behind this is simple. If one takes away an authoritarian leader's most valuable weapon, the coercive apparatus, he is left to 'fend for himself' against a movement seeking to topple him; he loses his means of repression. Furthermore, "side switching and defection have been linked to longer civil war duration, higher numbers of people killed, counterinsurgency dynamics and success, and fundamental changes within war such as the emergence of new organizations, preferences, and identities"[54]. This points to the negative consequences that could arise as a result of the military breaking away from the regime. Military defection makes conflict dynamics and eventual conflict resolution more difficult due to the militarization of the opposition, which sometimes comes with defection. This becomes a huge disadvantage for an authoritarian leader who would, under 'normal circumstances', turn to the military for help.

Military defection could take on a variety of different forms. According to Alexei Anisin and Pelin Musil, military defection could be either vertical or horizontal. Vertical defection is where "both commanders and their subordinates defect[ing] from their respective unit"[55]. This was the case in Yemen in 2011 where "both higher officers and subordinates defect[ed] from particular units"[56]. As for the latter, horizontal defection is where "commanders remain[ing] loyal and subordinates defect[ing] across different military units"[57]. In other words, the entire military as a

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[53] Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 5.
[54] Lee Seymour, "Why Factions Switch Sides in Civil Wars: Rivalry, Patronage, and Realignment in Sudan", *International Security* 39, no.2 (2014): 93.
[55] Alexei Anisin and Pelin Musil, "Resistance and Military Defection in Turkey", *Mediterranean Politics* 28, no.2 (2021): 210.
[56] Dorothy Ohl and Holger Albrecht, "Exit, Resistance, Loyalty: Military Behavior During Unrest in Authoritarian Regimes", *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no.1 (2016): 42.
[57] Alexei Anisin and Pelin Musil, "Resistance and Military Defection in Turkey", *Mediterranean Politics* 28, no.2 (2021): 210.

whole could defect and side with the opposition, or it could split with some defecting and others remaining loyal to the regime. The shape and form that military defection could take on is influenced by a wide array of different factors, including how the military as an institution is structured; something that will be further discussed in the following section.

"Defectors are a phenomenon that governments both fear and seek. They repudiate the system from which they came, and, if they held a position of trust, they reveal to the receiving side information about the inner workings of their former country. For the losing side, this can be catastrophic, while for the receiving side it can be a unique and valuable source of information"[58]. While this statement discusses defection during war, war between states, it applies to defection during civil uprisings. One final point that should be noted when discussing military defection is the gravity of the act itself. Even in the most democratic of states, military defection is regarded as a crime worthy of the capital punishment. Defection is viewed as the ultimate form of betrayal due to the fact that when a soldier defects to join the other side, he takes with him valuable and strategic intelligence that could very well bring about the downfall of the regime. As a result, during a civil uprising, when orders of repression are given out, and soldiers start contemplating defection, they have to consider the immense risk they are about to take.

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[58] Kevin Riehle, *Soviet Defectors: Revelations of Renegade Intelligence Officers, 1924-1954* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 1.

2.5: Ethnic Stacking and Military Defection

The aforementioned sections discussed coup-proofing and ethnic stacking as an introduction to this section. Coup-proofing strategies, as previously mentioned, are aimed at reducing the likelihood that the military would initiate a coup against the incumbent regime. These strategies however, influence the behavior of the military personnel in different contexts, even in how they respond to civil uprisings. This section will combine ethnic stacking and military defection in order to understand the effect that ethnic stacking, as a strategy, has on military defection. This will help with the understanding of how in its attempt to prevent coups, a regime could provoke military personnel to exhibit disloyal behavior.

Generally speaking, according to Marianne Dahl, "one cost of coup-proofing measures is that it erodes the organization of the security forces, and increases both the willingness and opportunity for individual soldiers to defect"[59]. She goes on to explain that "as coup-proofing deteriorates the military institution, increases personal as well as group grievances and reduces the likelihood that defecting soldiers will be detected, and subsequently punished, it increases the likelihood of military defection"[60]. This highlights an existing link between coup-proofing strategies, in general, and defection. Zooming in on ethnic stacking, it is important to examine the impact of this strategy on military behavior. Many scholars have attempted such a task, which resulted in a vast body of literature that is crucial to examine.

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[59] Marianne Dahl, "Military Defection: How coup-proofing strategies increase the likelihood of military defection", *PRIO Policy Brief* 18 (2016): 4.
[60] Ibid.

According to Laflamme and McLauchlin, "ethnic stacking has kept members of in-groups loyal in the face of some important uprisings from below, while possibly making out-group officers more inclined to defect"[61]. They proceed to explain that "by favoring in- groups, regimes can keep in-group soldiers loyal. In-group loyalty comes at the cost of antagonizing members of out-groups, but many regimes gladly run that risk"[62]. Similarly, according to Sharon Nepstad's research on military defections in Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain in 2011, she hypothesizes that "in stratified societies where the regime is dominated by and privileges one particular ethnic or sectarian group, individual security force members will remain loyal if they are members of that privileged group. Security force members who are part of an underprivileged group are less likely to remain loyal"[63]. In other words, according to Eva Bellin, "when the military is deeply invested in the survival of regime because of its blood ties, or its ethnic/sectarian ties, or its crony capitalist ties to the regime, that military has significant incentive to shoot civilians even if such action violates its other mandates. The only constraint on such behavior is the need to keep the rank and file from defecting, which is a potential challenge since the interests of the troops are not necessarily aligned with those of the military elite"[64]. Delving deeper into how the different modalities of ethnic stacking affects military defections, Nepstad hypothesizes that when "a military is structured so that officers are largely from a privileged ethnic/sectarian group but the rank-and-file are from a disadvantaged group, there is a higher likelihood that the military will divide, with officers remaining loyal and recruits defecting"[65]. This hypothesis was drawn

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[61] Julien Laflamme and Theodore McLauchlin, "The Efficacy of Ethnic Stacking: Military Defection during Uprisings in Africa", *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no.4 (2020): 7.
[62] Ibid: 1.
[63] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 345.
[64] Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring", *Comparative Politics* 44, no.2 (2012): 133.
[65] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 346.

from the analysis of the case of Syria in 2011. From the case of Bahrain in 2011, Nepstad drew

the hypothesis that "when the military is structured so that officers *and* recruits come from the

same privileged ethnic/sectarian group, the military institution as a whole is likely to remain

loyal"[66]. As portrayed by all the aforementioned statements, soldiers and officers who are part of

the out-group, meaning those who have no shared ethnic or sectarian identity with the ones in

power, are more likely to defect. The reasoning behind such statements is simple. As mentioned,

ethnic stacking guarantees the leader the loyalty of the soldiers and officers who share the same

affiliation as him. This is due to the fact that those soldiers and officers who are part of the in-

group, have a stake in the regime's survival. As for the out-group soldiers and officers, they

become the leader's wild cards. As mentioned, ethnic stacking plays a very big role in creating

grievances among out-group soldiers and officers as a result of the marginalization that they

face. Furthermore, due to the lack of commonality, the interests of the soldiers and officers

belonging to the out-group do not necessarily coincide with the interests of the regime. In other

words, the out-group soldiers and officers have no stakes in the regime's survival, making them

more likely to defect.

While ethnic stacking might increase the likelihood of out-group soldiers defecting, it has been

shown that it limits mass defections. The reasoning for this has to do with structure. According to

Laflamme and McLauchlin, "commanding officers are in a position to push all their subordinates

to defect with them by using their power to order them"[67]. They go on to explain that "ethnic

stacking in the officer corps thus should help the regime to prevent mass defection down the

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Julien Laflamme and Theodore McLauchlin, "The Efficacy of Ethnic Stacking: Military Defection during Uprisings in Africa", *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5, no.4 (2020): 7.

chain of command. Putting in-group officers in senior positions means that far fewer orders to defect are issued to subordinates"[68]. This is due to the fact that in-group officers are more likely to stick with the regime and portray complete loyalty, as mentioned, due to ethnic stacking. As a result, they would not give out general orders to defect to the other side or turn against the regime.

While ethnic stacking makes it that out-group soldiers and officers are more likely to defect and join the opposition during a civil uprising, it has to be noted that this is not an automatic response. According to Kevin Koehler, Dorothy Ohl and Holger Albrecht's research on military desertion, "strong grievances against military service will not automatically lead to action. Potential deserters have incentives to falsify their preferences and stay in the military"[69]. This could also be applied to defection. This brings the discussion to address the final piece of the puzzle: the nature of the civil uprising and how it is perceived by the soldiers and officers in the military.

2.6: Perception of the Civil Uprising

With the examination of the literature, the previous sections established that in sectarian or ethnically stacked militaries in-group soldiers and officers are likely to stick with the regime and follow orders of repression in the case of a civil uprising. On the other hand, out-group soldiers and officers are more likely to defect in the case of a civil uprising, due to harbored grievances. While the validity of the latter statement is recognized, it leaves out one important piece of the

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[68] Ibid.
[69] Kevin Koehler, Dorothy Ohl, and Holger Albrecht, "From Disaffection to Desertion: How Networks Facilitate Military Insubordination in Civil Conflict", *Comparative Politics* 48, no.4 (2016): 442.

puzzle: the civil uprising in question and how it is perceived by those soldiers and officers. This section will delve deeper into understanding the importance of this piece of the puzzle and the role it plays in motivating, or hindering, out-group soldiers' and officers' defection.

According to Koehler, Ohl and Albrecht's research on military desertion, "soldiers contemplating desertion from the military amid a civil conflict are confronted with a dilemma: although they might harbor strong grievances against continued military service, they face incentives to falsify their preferences and stay in the army"[70]. The very same thing could be said about defection. Soldiers and officers contemplating defection during a civil uprising need to take into consideration the gravity of the risk they are about to take. Koehler and Albrecht's research on military desertion explains that "the personal risk associated with a desertion attempt prevents individuals from turning disposition into action. Hence, moral grievances cause individual preference falsification, rather than desertion"[71]. Again, this could very well be applied to defection. Similarly, Makara argues that "regardless of the grievances that "losers" within the security apparatus might hold, turning against the ruling regime is a risky venture. Personnel that conspire against the regime likely face harsh retribution should their plot fail… therefore, overt dissent is unlikely to occur without a significant reduction in the risk involved"[72]. In other words, according to Nepstad, "even the most underprivileged troops are unlikely to defect if they believe that the state is strong enough to withstand a major civilian uprising"[73]. These statements all point to the fact that grievances do not automatically translate into defection during times of

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[70] Ibid: 439.
[71] Holger Albrecht and Kevin Koehler, "Going on the Run: What Drives Military Desertion in Civil War", *Security Studies* 27, no.2 (2018): 184.
[72] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): 340.
[73] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 337.

civil unrest. For out-group soldiers and officers, who have deeply-rooted grievances, defecting during a civil uprising is a difficult and dangerous choice, it is one that there is no turning back from. As a result, grievances alone cannot be used to explain the defection of out-group soldiers and officers.

According to McLauchlin, "the belief that the regime will collapse provokes a cascade of defection, bringing about the very collapse it predicts"[74]. This belief is based on perception, how the chains of events during times of civil unrest are viewed by the soldiers and officers. There are several characteristics, or elements, that a civil uprising could possess which could contribute to the perception that it might succeed in bringing about the collapse of the regime. This perception, then, motivates those soldiers and officers contemplating defection to actually go ahead and do so. This has to do with, as mentioned, the reduced risk associated. At the end of the day, defection is a crime punishable by the death penalty, and for soldiers and officers considering defection they need to ensure that they will not face such a horrific fate if they do decide to defect. One such way where they would not have to face such a fate is if the regime is on the brink of collapse, or at least if that is how it is perceived.

This thesis focuses on four elements in particular that a civil uprising might possess that could contribute to the perception that it is likely to succeed in bringing about the regime's collapse. These four elements are: whether the uprising has a broad base of support or not, whether the movement is violent or peaceful, whether it has momentum or not, and whether it manages or fails to elicit any form of reaction from the international community. The reasoning behind

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[74] Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion", *Comparative Politics* 42, no.3 (2010): 333.

focusing on these four elements is that these in particular 'stand out' when looking at the two cases of 1982 and 2011; which will be presented in chapters four and five. It is then crucial to explain these elements in an abstract manner before proceeding to their examination in the case of Syria.

The first element is popularity, which in essence means that the uprising has a broad base of support. According to Salvador Barbera and Matthew Jackson, "a population considering a revolt must participate in sufficient numbers to succeed"[75]. The reasoning behind such a statement is simple. As Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan explain, "large-scale and diverse participation may afford a resistance campaign a strategic advantage, which in turn, increases the pressure points and enhances the leverage that the resistance achieves vis-à-vis its state adversary"[76]. Furthermore, "it is more difficult and costlier for any regime to punish large numbers of protestors"[77]. This has to do with the fact that excessive and large-scale repression could lead to the regime losing support, sometimes even the support of those who would, under 'normal' circumstances, rally behind it and support it. When facing off the regime and its forces, the opposition needs to have the power, or the numbers, in order to bring about change. When an uprising has a broad base of support, which could be represented by the number of followers it has, it is capable of presenting itself as a legitimate threat to the incumbent regime. If large numbers of people are demanding policy changes, or are calling for regime change, their efforts are more likely to be fruitful than if a handful of people do so. Numbers signal the popularity of a

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[75] Salvador Barbera and Matthew Jackson, "A Model of Protests, Revolution, and Information" (2016): 1.
[76] Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 41.
[77] Sebastian Hellmeier and Michael Bernhard, "Mass Mobilization and Regime Change: Evidence From a New Measure of Mobilization for Democracy and Autocracy From 1900 to 2020", *The Varieties of Democracy Institute (2022)*: 6.

movement, feeding into the perception that a civil uprising is likely to bring about the downfall of the incumbent regime. This, in turn, makes out-group soldiers and officers more likely to defect due to the perceived reduction in risk.

It has to be noted that the aforementioned element has an added 'layer' when it comes to influencing the defection of out-group soldiers and officers. While it contributes to the perception that an uprising is likely to succeed; thus, making out-group soldiers and officers more likely to defect, it also motivates these men to defect in a different way. A civilian uprising that has a broad base of support means that it is more likely to include friends and family members of those soldiers and officers. This is especially the case in conscript armies, where soldiers are usually drawn from the masses. According to David Pion-Berlin, Diego Esparanza, and Kevin Grisham, "a conscript force will be less likely to mobilize against its own people. The argument here is that those enlisted servicemen in a conscript army are drawn from the masses and are usually within the same class and age range as the protesters themselves. Hence, they can more easily identify with their cause than can self-selected volunteers and would be more reluctant to use force against them"[78]. When an uprising has a broad base of followers, this increases the chances that a 'link' between the military and the people could form; thus, making the soldiers and officers already contemplating defection to go ahead and do so.

The second element is nonviolence, which entails how the protestors present themselves. According to one study, "violent campaigns facing government repression are less than 20% likely to succeed; [while] nonviolent campaigns facing regime repression are more than 46%

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[78] David Berlin, Diego Esperanza, and Kevin Grisham, "Staying Quartered: Civilian Uprisings and Military Disobedience in Twenty-First Century", *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no.2 (2014): 237.

likely to succeed"[79]. This does not mean that violent movements are always bound to fail, on the contrary, it just means that non-violent movements have better chances at success. The reasoning behind this is simple. In relation to the aforementioned characteristic, "sustained and successful nonviolent campaigns usually engage a large number of participants than do violent ones"[80]. In other words, "protester violence always leads to smaller protests because it decreases the appeal of protesting and increases the probability of state violence"[81] As mentioned previously, numbers matter when attempting to bring about regime change. Violent movements, in their nature, tend to repel potential protesters. This is due to the immediate danger and human rights abuses associated with movements of such nature. Failing to garner a large 'fan base', violent movements are then less likely to bring about any real change, let alone bring down the regime itself. Furthermore, "it is much easier for a regime or occupier to justify violent crackdowns against violent resistors than it is to justify the killing and torture of unarmed women and children involved in nonviolent demonstrations"[82]. As a result, with violent movements the regime is more likely to go 'all out' and escalate its use of violence, easily crushing the uprising, knowing that it would not face any real consequences.

The aforementioned element not only contributes to the perception that a civil uprising is likely to succeed; thus, motivating the defection of out-group soldiers and officers, it also has the power to motivate their defection in a different way. According to Dahl, Scott Gates, and Havard Nygard, "the likelihood of defection rises considerably when the state employs violence against a

[79] Maria Stephan, "Civil Resistance in the Middle East and its Aftermath", *Middle East Institute* (2012).
[80] Ali Kadivar, "Mass mobilization and the Durability of New Democracies", *American Sociological Review* 83, no.2 (2018): 393.
[81] Zachary Steinert-Threlkeld, Alexander Chan, and Jungseock Joo, "How State and Protester Violence Affect Protest Dynamics", *Journal of Politics* 84, no.2 (2022): 1.
[82] Maria Stephan, "Civil Resistance in the Middle East and its Aftermath", *Middle East Institute* (2012).

non-violent movement"[83]. Similarly, according to Stephen Zunes, "unarmed movements, especially if they are completely nonviolent, increase the likelihood of defections and non-cooperation from police and military whereas armed revolts strengthen the role of the government's coercive apparatus"[84]. The reasoning behind such statements is simple. According to Timothy Hazen, "nonviolent movements are more likely to influence military defections since the military is more hesitant to shoot unarmed civilians"[85]. This is where the moral and ethical considerations of the soldiers ordered to shoot unarmed civilians kick in, making them reconsider their obedience to the regime. This is due to the fact that at the end of the day these unarmed protesters are their own people, the people that these soldiers vowed to protect. With armed or violent movements however, soldiers are forced to utilize force as self-defense, usually using that as a justification to the repression. Furthermore, with armed movements, "protester violence decreases the likelihood of regime defections, further decreasing the pool of potential protesters. Peaceful protest convinces regime agents of their physical safety should they defect, increasing the probability that police, members of the armed forces, or legislators switch allegiances"[86]. As mentioned, violent movements tend to repel many potential protesters due to the human rights abuses that usually come along with such movements. Subsequently, this also repels potential military defectors.

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[83] Scott Gates, Marianne Dahl, and Havard Nygard, "Standing Idly by during the Revolution: How the Security Forces Critically Affect the Success or Failure of Non-Violent Campaigns", *PRIO Policy Brief 15* (2016): 2.
[84] Stephen Zunes, "Unarmed Insurrection Against Authoritarian Governments in the Third World: A New Kind of Revolution", *Third World Quarterly* 15, no.3 (1994): 411.
[85] Timothy Hazen, "Defect or Defend? Explaining Military Responses During the Arab Uprisings", *PhD Dissertation* (Loyola University Chicago: 2016): 38.
[86] Zachary Steinert-Threlkeld, Alexander Chan, and Jungseock Joo, "How State and Protester Violence Affect Protest Dynamics", *Journal of Politics* 84, no.2 (2022): 6.

"Crises, such as revolutions and currency attacks, rarely occur; but when they do, they typically arrive in waves"[87]. The third element that a civil uprising could possess which could also help contribute to the perception that it might succeed in bringing about the downfall of the regime is momentum. What is meant by momentum in the context of this thesis is whether civil uprisings are coincidingly taking place in other countries and succeeding. Domino effect, contagion theory, and protest or democratic diffusion are all terms used to explain the idea that civil unrest in one country could sometimes spread and influence people from other countries, who are experiencing similar conditions of repression, to rise up. According to Barany, "on rare occasions, multiple revolutions happen in quick succession as revolutionary fervor 'infects' a series of countries in the same region"[88]. There are various examples to this happening such as the fall of communism, the Color Revolutions, or the Arab Spring, just to name a few[89]. This momentum strengthens the perception that a regime is likely to fall if regimes in other countries are also collapsing. Focusing on the Arab Spring, "the successful protests in Tunisia and then Egypt set in motion a process of regime change by sending a powerful signal to protesters in other countries, who were inspired by what their Tunisian and Egyptian peers achieved"[90]. The success stories in Tunisia and Egypt 'infected' and inspired the people in other countries in the region to speak up against the similar repression and conditions of turmoil they had been living under. In the modern world, this 'infection', or 'contagion', is further facilitated by social media. Again, focusing on the Arab Spring, "it was social media that brought the narrative of successful

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[87] Heng Chen and Wing Suen, "Falling Dominoes: A Theory of Rare Events and Crisis Contagion", *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 8, no.1 (2016): 228.
[88] Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 38.
[89] Heng Chen and Wing Suen, "Falling Dominoes: A Theory of Rare Events and Crisis Contagion", *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 8, no.1 (2016): 229.
[90] Justus Bamert, Fabrizio Gilardi, and Fabio Wasserfallen, "Learning and the Diffusion of Regime Contention in the Arab Spring", *Research and Politics* (2015): 1.

social protest across multiple, previously closed, authoritarian media systems"[91]. To sum up, if an uprising possesses the momentum referred to here, this reinforces the perception that it is likely to succeed. This, in turn, motivates the soldiers and officers contemplating defection to translate their thoughts into action.

One final element that a civil uprising might possess that could lead to it being perceived as likely to succeed is the role of the international community, if it decides to have one. There are several layers to this element. When civil unrest targeted at bringing down a regime is instigated somewhere, and the regime decides to respond with force, the international community can sometimes decide to take action and intervene in the conflict. This intervention could take on many forms; however, there are specific ways in which the international community could react which might strengthen the perception that the regime is likely to collapse. First, it could withdraw its support for the regime. "The removal of support for the regime from the international community can help nonviolent campaigns to gain some leverage"[92]. If the world views a regime as illegitimate, this strengthens the perception that the regime's days in power are numbered. This 'removal of support' could manifest in several ways, such as the imposition of sanctions for example. According to Julia Grauvogel, Amanda Licht, and Christian von Soest's research on sanctions, "international sanctions [are] a key foreign policy tool for stopping the suppression of internal opposition and, more generally, for instigating democratization abroad"[93]. In other words, according to Nepstad, "if a ruler's repressive acts result in international

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[91] Muzammil Hussain, and Philip Howard, "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades? ICTs and the Fuzzy Causes of the Arab Spring" *International Studies Review* 15 (2013): 62.

[92] Marie Castellote, "What makes nonviolent resistance movements successful?", *Bachelor Thesis* (Linnaeus University: 2022): 8.

[93] Julia Grauvogel, Amanda Licht, and Christian von Soest, "Sanctions and Signals: How International Sanction Threats Trigger Domestic Protest in Targeted Regimes", *International Studies Quarterly* 61 (2017): 86.

sanctions, the regime may appear to be severely weakened – especially if it is heavily dependent on other nations for aid, trade subsidies, or military support"[94]. International condemnation of a regime's repression of an uprising, which could happen through the imposition of sanctions, strengthens the perception that the uprising is likely to succeed. This, in turn, motivates defections. On the other hand, according to Nepstad "when the international community does not impose sanctions or withhold support, the regime's strength appears intact, thereby deterring defections"[95]. Sanctions are usually imposed to weaken a regime, to deny it of resources necessary to stay in power. Without enough sources to continue the repression, a regime is seen as unable to continue resorting to such methods for long. The international community's removal of support for a regime could also come in the form of support to the uprising, whether material, humanitarian, or even just by acknowledging its legitimacy. When this happens, it makes it seem as though the uprising has a fighting chance at achieving its goals. This in turn, motivates those soldiers and officers who want to defect to actually go ahead and do so.

The four aforementioned elements discussed, when present in a civil uprising, help contribute to the perception that the uprising is likely to succeed in the face of the regime. This perception has the power to motivate soldiers to actually defect. As mentioned, this has to do with the reduced risk associated with such a perception. This puzzle piece is best understood as the 'opportunity' for defection. When soldiers and officers perceive a civil uprising as likely to succeed in bringing about the collapse of the regime, this is an opportunity for those men to express their grievances and actually defect. However, if an uprising is perceived to be weak and likely to fail, the

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[94] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 340.
[95] Ibid: 347.

opportunity for defection disappears. This has to do with, as mentioned, if the regime is perceived to be strong, then it would be capable of crushing the uprising in question and bringing those who defected to face the consequences of their actions. As a result, this deters many soldiers and officers contemplating defection from actually going ahead and doing so.

2.7: Conclusion

This chapter presented and explained the key concepts that will be used throughout the following chapters of this thesis. It also laid down the theoretical framework of this study. By understanding the many different theories discussed in this chapter, and how they are interconnected, it becomes an easier task to apply these theories onto a real-world example. The following chapters will utilize these abstract concepts in an attempt to make sense of the two cases examined in this thesis, the cases of 1982 and 2011.

There are three main theories, adopted from the literature that will guide the following chapters: ethnic or sectarian stacking makes it so that out-group soldiers and officers are more likely to defect in the context of a civil uprising, due to existing grievances; grievances do not automatically translate to defection; and grievances, combined with the perception that the regime is likely to fall (perception that stems from the four elements mentioned), is what translates thoughts about defection into action.

Chapter 3 – The Syrian Military: A Historical Overview

The Syrian military can be considered as a reflection of Syrian society. What this means is that the highly sectarian nature of Syrian society could also be perceived by looking at the military institution. This chapter will delve deeper into the examination and analysis of the structure and composition of the Syrian military, providing an overview to why and how it came to be structured in the way it is. Furthermore, it will also highlight the different consequences that arise from having a sectarian-structured military. By having a clear picture of the structure of the Syrian military, it becomes an easier task to understand how the military would behave when faced with orders of repression during a civil uprising.

3.1: Sunni Control (1946-1963)

The institution that is the Syrian military has witnessed many different changes take place to its structure and organization throughout the decades. When Syria gained its independence from the French in 1946, the group that came out on top, dominating the political scene and the armed forces, was the Sunni Muslims. Despite such a fact, there was actually a large number of Alawites in the military. Looking at the testimony of Colonel Abdul Hamid al-Sarraj, the head of the Military Intelligence Office in the 1950s, he stated that "he was surprised that by 1955, at least 55 percent of non-commissioned officers were Alawites, in addition to the large number of Alawites in the ranks of ordinary soldiers. However, Alawites did not make up a significant portion of the ranks of officers compared to Sunnis"[96]. To better understand the reasoning behind

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[96] Ayman Al-Dassouky, Navvar Saban, et.al, "The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias, and Foreign Investment", *Omran for Strategic Studies* (2019): 18.

having a large number of Alawites in the armed forces, the analysis of the socio-economic and political conditions present in Syria at the time is crucial.

When the Sunnis came out on top after Syria's independence from the French, this happened at the expense of other ethnic groups, mainly the Alawites, leading to their marginalization in all aspects of Syrian society. It is important to note the fact that "the [Syrian] military retained its reputation as a place for the minorities"[97]. As a result, "officers from rural areas and minority backgrounds, especially members of the Alawite sect, were the most prominent of the emerging forces within the military establishment"[98]. The military institution presented itself as a safe haven for those who were marginalized by the exclusionary policies set forth by the Sunnis. It was also a very attractive option for the Alawites to make a stable source of income. Furthermore, it is also important to note that their marginalization in Syrian society has made it difficult for many Alawites to be able to afford to pay the military service exemption fee. In 1948, military service in the Syrian army became mandatory, and unlike many Sunnis who were capable of paying their way out of doing their military service, the majority of the Alawites couldn't[99]. In the 1950s and 60s, the exemption fee cost about 500-600 Syrian pounds. Now, "for the peasants, especially the Alawis, 500 or 600 pounds represented the value of several seasons of arduous labor"[100]; however, for the Sunnis, "no matter how humble in condition, [they] could as a rule afford to part with 500 or 600 Syrian pounds to avoid one and a half or two years of compulsory service"[101]. This automatically led to a large number of Alawites in the military.

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[97] Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria" *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no.4 (1989): 440.
[98] Ayman Al-Dassouky, Navvar Saban, et.al, "The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias, and Foreign Investment", *Omran for Strategic Studies* (2019): 18.
[99] Ibid: 19.
[100] Hanna Batatu, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance", *Middle East Journal* 35, no.3 (1981): 342.
[101] Ibid.

Lastly, even though the Sunnis were in power, they were themselves caught up in a power struggle with each other, often resulting in consecutive coup d'états. According to Daniel Pipes, "as senior officers engaged in innumerable military coup d'états between 1949 and 1963, each change of government was accompanied by ruinous power struggles among the Sunnis, leading to resignations and the depletion of Sunni ranks"[102]. To put it simply, "as Sunni officers eliminated each other, Alawis inherited their positions"[103]. All of these different factors resulted in a large number of Alawites occupying the ranks of the military. However, still, the majority of the higher ranks continued to be dominated by Sunnis.

3.2: Beginnings of Alawite Control (1963 – 1970)

With the rise of the Baath Party to power in 1963, things began to change in the military institution. According to Pipes, "from its earliest years, the Ba'th held special attraction for Syrians of rural and minority backgrounds, including the Alawis, who joined in disproportionately large numbers"[104]. The same thing could be said about recruitment to the military[105]. According to Al-Razzaz, Secretary General of the Baath Party's pan-Arab National Command from 1965 to 1966, many "officers from the Sunni majority were systematically retired or assigned to unimportant positions, while strategic posts were reserved for Alawi and other minority officers"[106]. Furthermore, he went on to say that Alawis were "given preference in admission to Syria's Military Academy"[107]. This led to "the gradual increase in the number of Alawite commissioned officers, [which] was the factor that allowed them to take decisive control

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[102] Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria" *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no.4 (1989): 441.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Alasdair Drysdale, "Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps: A Conceptualization", *Civilisations* 29, no.3/4 (1979).
[106] Ibid: 367.
[107] Ibid.

over the armed forces"[108]. Before the Baath Party seized power, the Alawites were numerically dominant in the Syrian military. However, after the ascension of the Baath to power, Alawites not only dominated numerically in the armed forces, they also started to occupy the majority of the higher ranks. This allowed them to gain a greater degree of control in the military.

3.3: Sectarian Stacking – The New Status Quo (1970 – 2000)

Coming to power as a result of a coup d'état in 1970, and with the consolidation of his position as head of state in 1971, Hafez al-Assad understood that there was a thorn in his side that he needed to quickly attend to. Al-Assad was the first Alawite head of state[109], meaning: a member of the ethnic minority ruling over an ethnic majority (Sunni). He knew that this was going to constantly be a dark cloud looming over his head; however, demographics was not something he could control. As a result, he turned his attention to something that he could indeed control: the military institution. However there, "he faced another dilemma: if the majority of the population is Sunni, then surely the majority of the personnel in the military would also be Sunni"[110]; since the Syrian military is a conscript force. As a result, there was a need to develop a new structure in the military that would guarantee al-Assad the military's loyalty. What al-Assad basically did was that he institutionalized the practice that was set forth by the Baath Party when it first came to power. Exploiting the sectarian cleavages of Syrian society to his full advantage, al-Assad structured the military in a way where the institution's fate and his own would become one. He decided to rely heavily on sectarian stacking as one of his preferred means of coup-proofing.

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[108] Ayman Al-Dassouky, Navvar Saban, et.al, "The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias, and Foreign Investment", *Omran for Strategic Studies* (2019): 19.
[109] Diana Darke, "Is Bashar al-Assad really the guardian angel of Syria's minorities?" *Middle East Institute* (2021).
[110] Mohaned Al-Hamdi, "Civil-military relations, coup-proofing, and militaries in the Arab Spring", *PhD. Dissertation* (Kansas State University, 2020): 141.

With that, he appointed "army commanders based on kinship, sect, or loyalty to him, placing them in the strategic forces and positions. The overall orientation of the military was focused on attracting the largest number of Alawites in the active forces and helping them through promotions and progression into the highest posts of the hierarchy"[111]. The resulting structure reserved the top commanding ranks for the Alawites, while the lower ranks were reserved for the Sunnis and other minorities. According to one estimate "Alawi officer representation increased from 30 percent in 1963-66 to 42.1 percent in 1966-70, and to 42.9 percent in 1970-78. The Alawis were clearly the preponderant minority force in the Ba'thist military structure"[112]. This led to the marginalization of the Sunnis within the military institution, finding themselves at the bottom of the hierarchical chain of command every time.

It has to be noted that in order to maintain the illusion that the Syrian military is an inclusive force, and to "satisfy the different Sunni elements"[113], a few Sunnis were indeed appointed the rank of officers. However, despite this higher rank, these Sunni officers had "no independent power base nor a base of support from which to muster strength of their own within the armed forces"[114]. These Sunni officers "neither represented nor led strong army factions to contest the supremacy of Alawi officers. They could act only on an individual basis, not as a group"[115]. Furthermore, while the Alawite officers were assigned the important strategic positions in the military, "Sunni officers were assigned to less important units in faraway regions"[116]. To sum up, "Sunnis entered the military as individuals, while Alawis entered as members of a sect; the latter,

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[111] Ibid: 142.
[112] Mahmud Faksh, "The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force", *Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no.2 (1984): 144.
[113] Ibid: 145.
[114] Ibid.
[115]Ibid.
[116] Ibid.

therefore, prospered"[117]. Such a structure was meant to minimize the chances of the occurrence of coups, something Syria has been plagued with throughout the decades.

3.4: Sectarian Stacking – Bashar al-Assad (2000 – 2011)

When Hafez al-Assad died and handed over the reins of power to his son, Bashar al-Assad, he passed on the structure that he had put in place. As a matter of fact, this structure of placing the Alawites on top and the Sunnis at the bottom was magnified under the rule of Bashar. This is portrayed in the fact that, "according to one estimate, over 90% of Syria's military officers are Alawite"[118]. Furthermore, the Alawites occupy the majority of the elite military units[119], as well as most of the paramilitary forces. For example, the Shabiha, a paramilitary force known for its brutality and "blind loyalty to the Alawite sect and the Assad family in particular"[120], is almost entirely made up of Alawites. On the other hand, however, "the military rank-and-file are largely Sunni conscripts"[121]. This shows how the 'Alawite-ization' of the Syrian military became more and more pronounced over the years, portraying what was referred to in Chapter Two as a 'shadow state'. This led to the heightening of the already existing grievances among the Sunnis in the military. According to Makara, "enlisted personnel complain about corruption and greed among officers and the security services, and they increasingly view the president [Bashar] as out of touch with their grievances"[122]. The regime's favoritism of Alawites within the military,

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[117] Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria" *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no.4 (1989): 441.
[118] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 344.
[119] Derek Lutterbeck, *Arab Uprisings and Armed Forces: Between Openness and Resistance* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2011): 46.
[120] "Syria: Shabiha Militia Member Tells It Like It Is", *PBS News Hour (2012).* https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/world-jan-june12-syria_06-15
[121] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 344.
[122] Michael Makara, "Coup Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring", *Democracy and Security* 9, no.4 (2013): page 348.

allocating them with higher rankings, better opportunities, and greater degree of power, came at the expense of the Sunnis. For the Sunnis in the military, there was no one to listen to their grievances, nothing that could be done to change the status quo. It has always been, and still is, the nature of the system put in place.

Examining and analyzing the structure of the Syrian military was meant to shed light on the grievances of the out-group (Sunni) soldiers and officers. Ethnic or sectarian stacking, in its nature, is designed to favor one group over all others, in this case the Alawites. Referring back to Laflamme and McLauchlin's definition of ethnic stacking, this favoritism of the Alawites comes at the expense of the marginalization of the Sunnis, leading to the rise of grievances that have no outlet for expression. With the understanding of the structure of the Syrian military, and based on the literature review presented in Chapter Two, it is now an easier task to hypothesize how military defections during a civil uprising would look like in Syria if they were to take place. With sectarian stacking, the Alawite soldiers and officers (in-group) are more likely to stick with the regime in case of a civil uprising. As for the Sunni soldiers and officers however, they are more likely to defect and join the opposition due to existing grievances.

3.5: Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the transformation of the Syrian military throughout the decades, and how it came to be stacked in a sectarian manner. The way that the Syrian military was structured was meant to force military loyalty, it was meant to be a guarantee for Hafez al-Assad, and his son after him, that their positions as heads of state were safeguarded against coups. While this structure garnered al-Assads the loyalty of the privileged in-group, the Alawites, it gave rise to

deeply-rooted grievances amongst the marginalized out-group soldiers and officers, the Sunnis.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, coup-proofing strategies, which is what sectarian stacking is, could sometimes provoke military personnel to exhibit disloyal behavior. This is exactly the case here. The grievances that develop amongst the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military (Sunnis), as a result of sectarian stacking, act as powerful motivators for these men to engage in disloyal acts. This is something that Hafez al-Assad and his son after him failed to consider.

Chapter 4 – The Hama Massacre

This chapter will look at and examine the first case that this thesis focuses on: The Hama massacre of 1982, also known as the Islamist uprising of 1982. The chapter will first begin by taking a step back and examining the history of the Syrian state in relation to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. This will help with the understanding of what exactly led to the uprising, and the subsequent massacre, taking place. Furthermore, it will look at how the regime decided to respond to the uprising and the chain of events that followed. With that, this chapter delves into the examination of the behavior of the Syrian military, especially the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers, and whether large-scale military defections took place. The grievances of the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers were present, something that this chapter will also look at and examine. These grievances, as mentioned in previous chapters, play a big role in motivating these out-group soldiers and officers to defect during a civil uprising. However, this is not an automatic phenomenon. Finally, this chapter will dive into the analysis of the nature of the 1982 uprising, and how it was perceived in order to understand why the out-group soldiers and officers behaved in the manner that they did.

4.1: Simmering Tensions – Muslim Brotherhood versus The Regime

In order to understand the disturbing events that ensued over the course of February of 1982, it is first crucial to paint a picture of the historical context; the events that led up to the massacre. The massacre was by no means an isolated event. In fact, it was the culmination of a "period of escalating violence in Syria that spanned more than half a decade"[123] between the secular

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[123] Dara Conduit, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama", *Middle East Journal* 70, no.2 (2016): 213.

Baathist regime of Hafez al-Assad and the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. As a matter of fact, the struggle between the Baath and the Muslim Brotherhood predates Hafez al-Assad's rise to power where it could be traced back to the assent of the Baath Party to power in 1963. The inherent tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Baath Party was centered upon the opposing views that each of them had regarding the role of religion in Syrian society. "Advocating the implementation of Muslim values at social, juridical, even political level, an expression par excellence of Sunni milieu, the Brotherhood had to face a competing model – the secular nationalism (and pan-Arabism) developed by the Ba'ath party, after taking power in 1963"[124]. In other words, while the Muslim Brotherhood believed that Islam should play a bigger role in Syrian society, the Baath Party promoted and encouraged secularism. Recognizing the potential threat that the Muslim Brotherhood could come to pose, the Baath Party decided to place a ban on the Muslim Brotherhood's activities in 1964[125].

With the rise of Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970, tensions further escalated. This was primarily due to the fact that al-Assad was an Alawite. For many Sunnis, especially the conservative Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, the Shia Alawites were viewed as infidels[126]. This was due to the centuries' long schism between the Sunnis and the Shias, where the Sunnis viewed those adhering to Shiism as being non-Muslims[127]; or as "heterodox Muslims"[128] as seen by more pious Sunnis. Other than the religious aspect of the problem, al-Assad's policies and decisions were not always popular with the majority of pious Sunnis. This could be highlighted by looking

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[124] Ecaterina Cepoi, "The rise of Islamism in contemporary Syria: from Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi-Jihadi rebels", *Studia Politica* 13, no.3 (2013): 549.

[125] "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria", *Carnegie Middle East Center*.

[126] Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria" *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no.4 (1989): 434.

[127] Vali Nasr, *Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007): 31.

[128] Stanley Reed III, "Dateline Syria: Fin de Regime?", *Foreign Policy* (1980): 183.

at, for example, the 1976 intervention of Syrian troops in Lebanon. "While that intervention had broad regional and international support, it was far more controversial at home. For Syrian forces to come to the aid of Lebanon's Christians – who were on the verge of defeat at the hands of Muslim forces – was seen by pious Sunni Muslims in Syria as proof positive of the heretical nature of the Assad regime, a regime dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Islamic Shiism"[129]. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood despised al-Assad's favoritism of Alawites and the overly sectarian character of his regime[130]. The hostility between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood ran deep, and it continued to worsen the more time went on.

It has to be noted that "the Syrian Ikhwan [MB] have been characterized since their foundation by their deeply heterogeneous geographical, cultural and ideological composition"[131]. What this means is that the different 'branches' subsumed under the umbrella of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had different outlooks on how the goals of the organization should be attained. "From the mid-1960s, the organization suffered severe internal splits, mostly over the question of armed revolution"[132]. This led to the emergence of two separate camps by 1970: "one camp, led by Issam al-Attar, based on the Damascus branch, advocating peaceful opposition; and another more militant camp, centred around Hama, Aleppo and the northern cities, which called for both civil and armed resistance"[133]. More specifically, the Fighting Vanguard (al-tali'a al-

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[129] Glenn Robinson, "Syria's Long Civil War", *Current History* 111, no.749 (2012): 331.
[130] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 9.
[131] Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 82.
[132] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 2.
[133] Ibid.

muqatila), "a Hama-based radical splinter"[134] emerging "at the fringes of the latter faction"[135]:

the militant camp, decided that the best way to achieving the Brotherhood's goals is by

promoting "a radical solution against the Assad regime"[136]. By the first half of 1976, sporadic

"violent attacks on regime institutions, party officials, and army officers occurred throughout the

country"[137], becoming a rather common phenomenon. Several scholars attribute 1976 as being

the 'start date' of the uprising[138], or even civil war (as referred to by some scholars)[139] that

culminated in the Hama massacre of 1982.

The escalation of violence from the Muslim Brotherhood's side was met with increasing

violence by regime forces, with the "height of the Ikhwan-Ba'ath confrontation [coming]

between late 1979 and 1982"[140]. This period was marked with unparalleled levels of violence by

the Islamist opposition. This is highlighted in, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood's attack on

the Artillery Academy in Aleppo in June of 1979. The attack concluded with the massacre of "as

many as 83 Alawite cadets"[141]. This attack was condemned by the regime as well as by

prominent Sunni religious scholars and sheikhs in Syria, stating that "whoever participated in

such a crime is a traitor to his country… and that Islam is a religion of peace and cannot be used

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[134] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Review: Documenting the Roots and Dynamics of the Syrian Uprising", *Middle East Journal* 67, no.3 (2013): 470.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ecaterina Cepoi, "The rise of Islamism in contemporary Syria: from Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi-Jihadi rebels", *Studia Politica* 13, no.3 (2013): 550.
[137] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 5.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Glenn Robinson, "Syria's Long Civil War", *Current History* 111, no.749 (2012): 331.
[140] Ashes of Hama page 20
[141] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 6. – [the death toll varies in the literature Dara Conduit: 43 --- Raphael Lefevre also 83 --- Al-Thawra newspaper: 32 killed and 54 injured (23 June 1979)].

to justify such a crime"[142]. Another example of the Muslim Brotherhood's rather extreme 'modus operandi' was their attempt at assassinating the president in June of 1980[143]. According to Thomas Friedman, "by 1979-80, barely a week went by in Syria without a bomb going off outside a government institution or Soviet Aeroflot office, and brazen daylight shootings of Soviet advisers and Baath Party officials became almost routine; even President Assad's personal interpreter was abducted"[144]. Recognizing the increasing threat that the Muslim Brotherhood's radicalism posed to the security of the nation, Hafez al-Assad passed decree no.49 of July 1980 which "mandated capital punishment for those refusing to withdraw their membership to the Muslim Brotherhood"[145]. In other words, any member of the Muslim Brotherhood shall be killed. However, according to Al-Thawra newspaper's report, the official government newspaper, the law had several other articles; mainly one concerning a reduced sentence for those who, within one month of the passing of the law, publicly and in writing withdraw their support for the Brotherhood[146]. According to the same newspaper, the regime 'succeeded' in this way in 'persuading' many to withdraw their support. "In their withdrawal statements, those who withdrew affirmed that this organization [the Brotherhood] only achieves the interests of imperialism and colonialism, praising Law no.49 issued by President Hafez al-Assad, which allowed them to return to the path of righteousness and spared them the path of Satan and

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[142] Al-Thawra, (24 June, 1979): 1.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1979SyriaArabic/Jun%2024%201979%2C%2028%20الثورة%20Al-Thawra%29%2C%20%235010%2C%20Syria%20%28ar%29/mode/2up
[143] Raphael Lefevre, "The Syrian Brotherhood's Armed Struggle", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2012).
[144] Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 78.
[145] "Freedom House: UPR Stakeholder Submission – Syria", *Universal Periodic Review*.
[146] Al-Thawra, (8 July, 1980): 10.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1980SyriaArabic/Jul%2008%201980%2C%2028%20الثورة%20Al-Thawra%29%2C%20%235342%2C%20Syria%20%28ar%29/

criminality"[147]. The regime further responded to the Brotherhood's acts of terror by carrying out

mass arrests and massacres of Islamist political prisoners. One example is the Tadmur Prison

massacre of 1980[148], where the regime massacred many Islamist prisoners as a reaction to the

assassination attempt on al-Assad's life. Over the next two years, the violence from both sides

continued, culminating in the Hama uprising of 1982.

4.1.1: The Showdown at Hama

On the night of 2-3 February of 1982, at two o'clock in the morning, a Syrian military unit

patrolling the streets of Hama fell into an ambush[149]. The troops of this unit had "stumbled on the

hideout of the local guerrilla commander [of the Muslim Brotherhood], Umar Jawwad"[150].

Consequently, many of the soldiers in the patrol unit met their fates that night, falling victim to

the rifles of the "armed members of the Brotherhood [who were] ready to meet them"[151]. This

was viewed by the members of the Brotherhood as a win against the regime and its forces.

Emboldened by this 'small victory', Jawwad "gave the order for a general uprising"[152], urging

the people to gather in the streets and fight to bring down the regime of Hafez al-Assad. With the

call for jihad emanating from the minarets of the mosques, resonating throughout the streets of

Hama, "hundreds of Islamic fighters rose from their hiding places"[153], committing acts of pure

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[147] Ibid, (3 August, 1980): 1.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1980SyriaArabic/Aug%2003%201980%2C%2028%20%الثورةAl-Thawra%29%2C%20%235364%2C%20Syria%20%28ar%29/
[148] "Tadmur Prison: A Special Report", *The Syrian Human Rights Committee* (2015).
[149] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Los Angeles:
University of California Press, 1988): 332.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Andrew Beattie and Timothy Pepper, *The Rough Guide to Syria* (London: Penguin Books, 2011): 157.
[152] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Los Angeles:
University of California Press, 1988): 332.
[153] Ibid.

terror. As a result of this apparent outright insurrection by the Brotherhood, al-Assad decided to respond with lethal force, with what is known as a scorched earth policy.

4.1.2: Regime's Response – Show No Mercy

With the Brotherhood's violent actions against regime forces, al-Assad ordered that the military be rolled out, using whatever means necessary to put an end to the Brotherhood's uprising. This led to the military laying siege to the town of Hama, cutting it off from the outside world. Leaving nothing to chance, Riad al-Assad, the president's brother, was also ordered to lead the Defense Companies, a paramilitary force whose composition was 90 percent Alawite[154], into battle[155]. "Eyewitness reports estimated that as many as 100 tanks and 6000–8000 soldiers took part in the siege, barraging the city with shell and mortar fire every time a sniper started shooting"[156]. The regime spared no expense in its attempt to bring an end to the Islamic militancy, rolling out the 'big guns' to ensure its ultimate destruction.

It is crucial to point out that even though the Muslim Brotherhood was a Sunni-dominant organization, this did not mean that it automatically had the support of the majority of Sunni Syrians. "Syria's religious tapestry is [still more] complex. Sunni Islam is the most prevalent creed, professed by roughly three-quarters of the population. This majority, however, is far from monolithic: it includes Arabs as well as Kurds and other ethnic minorities. It is further subdivided by differences between relatively secular-minded Sunnis and their more conservative

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[154] Joseph Holliday, "The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle", *Institute for the Study of War* (2013): 6.
[155] Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion", *Comparative Politics* 42, no.3 (2010): 342.
[156] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 14.

counterparts"[157]. Focusing on the events of 1982, "when Hafez al-Assad waged war on the Muslim Brotherhood in the eighties, the Sunnis of the cities did not support the Islamic movement, as they saw their interests in the stability of the current political regime"[158]. Furthermore, "no one truly knew what life would be like under their [the Brotherhood] rule, and although they had the sympathy of religious conservatives, and of some merchants, former landowners and other victims of Ba'th rule, the weight of opinion was against them. Their long campaign of terror was political insanity"[159]. As a result, the Brotherhood failed to garner the widespread support of the population. The Brotherhood's "total strength at the beginning of 1982 probably did not surpass 5,000"[160]. The size of the Brotherhood's uprising was no match for the forces that the regime deployed. This led to the movement being crushed in a matter of three weeks, and the Brotherhood was reduced to nothingness. Those Muslim Brotherhood members who didn't die in the fighting, fled, or were sentenced to exile in the aftermath of the fighting.

Over the duration of the three weeks, the town of Hama was demolished, razed to the ground, and many people lost their lives. Different sources mention different numbers regarding the estimated death toll, with numbers ranging between 5,000 to 25,000[161]. According to an interview with Robert Fisk, who was present during the unfolding of events in Hama, he states that the number of casualties was below 20,000[162]. According to Al-Ahram's report at the time,

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[157] Frederic Hof and Alex Simon, "Sectarian Violence in Syria's Civil War: Causes, Consequences, and Recommendations for Mitigation", *The Center for the Prevention of Genocide*, 3.
[158] Yaman Almahamid, "Religion and the Syrian War: A Qualitative Research on the Role of Religion in the Syrian War", *Master's Thesis* (Norwegian University of Life Sciences: 2021): 29.
[159] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988): 337.
[160] Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren" *MERIP* 110 (1982).
[161] Dara Conduit, "The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama", *Middle East Journal* 70, no.2 (2016): 211.
[162] "Robert Fisk Remembers Hama Massacre" *Al-Jazeera* (2012). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8dSFeWxRnI

the number was between 8,000-10,000[163]. Regardless, however, this massacre is commonly viewed, as put by Robin Wright, as "the single deadliest act by any Arab government against its own people in the modern Middle East"[164]. The brute force that al-Assad decided to respond with still haunts many Syrians until this day, it is etched in their minds. The word Hama became synonymous with massacre, serving as a constant reminder to anyone who considers going head-to-head with the regime and its forces.

4.2: Military Defections

Having examined the events that unfolded in Syria in February 1982, and of the regime's response to these events, it is now crucial to examine how the Syrian military behaved in face of their orders to repress the Muslim Brotherhood's movement. While the military repressed the Islamist uprising, reducing it to nothingness, as explained in the previous section, it is important to dig deeper into the details and examine whether the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers remained with the regime, or defected to join the Islamist opposition.

The literature on military defections in Hama in 1982 is very limited. What exists is only briefly mentioned in newspaper articles or books. Furthermore, the narratives are inconsistent in their reports. On one hand, according to The New York Times reporting on February 11th, 1982, "the troops besieging Hama are being directed by Rifaat Assad, the President's brother. He has two full brigades, estimated by diplomatic sources to number 8000 men, under his command. There were unconfirmed reports that some soldiers have gone over to the rebels"[165]. While very vague,

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[163] Al-Ahram, (2 March 2011): 1. https://gpa-eastview-com.libproxy.aucegypt.edu/alahram/?a=d&d=aar19820302-01&e=-------en-25--1--img-txIN---------

[164] "Remembering the Hama Massacre" *Council on Foreign Relations* (2012).

[165] John Kifner, "Rebellion Erupts in Central Syria, Diplomats Report" *The New York Times* (February 11, 1982).

this report states that some defections did occur. Similar to the aforementioned source, in its

reporting and in its vagueness, Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville published in 1989 that

"altogether Hama was besieged by some 12,000 men, but this was no ordinary military operation:

it was more of a civil war, testing soldiers' loyalties to the limit. Some deserted to join the

insurgents"[166]. In line with Seale and McConville's statement on testing the loyalties of soldiers,

Theodore McLauchlin wrote: "the Muslim Brotherhood revolt had a strong sectarian cast. The

movement was almost entirely Sunni and presented Alawis as a heretical sect. Ultimately, the

use of ethnic recruitment allowed the military to clamp down effectively. Despite the widespread

employment of monitoring and punishment systems, there were occasionally serious disciplinary

problems among Sunni troops over the course of the insurrection. At least two units that had

been ordered to attack the Muslim Brotherhood in predominantly Sunni cities split between

Sunni and Alawi. Provoking such incidents was apparently part of the Brotherhood's

strategy"[167]. While this source does not directly state whether military defections took place or

not, it does point to the out-group Sunni troops' engagement in some form of disloyal behavior.

On the other hand, The Christian Science Monitor, a non-profit news organization, reported on

February 16th, 1982, that "the threat of the Brotherhood has meant security forces, uniformed and

plain-clothed, abound here with ever watchful eyes and ears. And although this has caused

resentment among Syrian citizens, there are no signs of large-scale defections to the

brotherhood"[168]. In a similar report, according to Alasdair Drysdale, "despite opposition reports

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[166] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988): 333.

[167] Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion", *Comparative Politics* 42, no.3 (2010): 342.

[168] Elaine Carey, "Syrian Regime Stands – Despite Violent Shaking by Hama Uprising", *The Christian Science Monitor* (February 16, 1982). https://www.csmonitor.com/1982/0216/021644.html

to the contrary, there were not massive desertions among troops putting down the rebellion"[169].

On the subject of the opposition, according to Fred Lawson, "whether or not army units defected to the rebels' side remains an open – and politically very sensitive – question. Later accounts suggested that rebels had dressed in regular army uniforms and this constituted the basis for reports of defections"[170].

Similarly, Aron Lund's research on what he termed "Syria's failed revolution" states that "in the early 1980s, there were scattered reports of army defections along sectarian lines, particularly during the Hama events in 1982. These mostly proved to be false, or isolated and inconsequential. The large-scale army defections that the MB gambled on as it rose in Hama never materialized"[171]. Lund goes on to say that "by and large, the Sunni-majority army proved eminently capable of repressing the MB in the 1980s, without fracturing along religious lines"[172]. Another source that should be mentioned here is the Ba'ath Party's 'Organisational Report' of 1985, presented in Nikolas Van Dam's captivating book. According to the Report's analysis of the events of 1982, "all this appeared clearly in the heroic role which those [Ba'th Party] comrades played in the confrontation with the hired criminal Muslim Brotherhood gang, when they eradicated its roots and rid the homeland of its crimes and sins, without committing any violations or displaying any signs of irresolution in carrying out orders. Neither did there appear any abnormal phenomena in their ranks despite the presence of quite a high percentage of non-

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[169] Alasdair Drysdale, "The Asad Regime and Its Troubles", *Middle East Research and Information Project* 110 (November/December 1982). https://merip.org/1982/11/the-asad-regime-and-its-troubles/
[170] Fred Lawson, "Social Bases for the Hama Revolt", *Middle East Research and Information Project* 110 (November/December 1982): Endnote #1. https://merip.org/1982/11/social-bases-for-the-hama-revolt/
[171] Aron Lund, "The Ghosts of Hama: The Bitter Legacy of Syria's Failed 1979-1982 Revolution" (Silc Forlag: 2011), 21. https://silc.se/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/The-Ghosts-of-Hama-by-Aron-Lund1.pdf
[172] Ibid.

party members amongst the ranks of these forces. This constituted a glorious episode in the history of our armed forces, in which their internal cohesion and unity were clear"[173]. This source, like the ones before it, emphasizes that no defections took place during the uprising of 1982, and that despite the presence of 'non-party members' in the armed forces, referring to the soldiers and officers not 'privileged' enough to be amongst the in-group, they still obeyed and followed orders of repression.

With the presentation of the aforementioned sources, it is important to analyze what these sources mean. What could be drawn from the examination of these sources, even though they offer two rather different points of view, is that defections in 1982, if they did occur, were insignificant. In other words, the scope of military defections was limited. Even though some of the sources point to insurrection by some Sunni soldiers, no large-scale defections took place in 1982. The majority of the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers, stuck with the regime, and obeyed their orders to repress the Muslim Brotherhood's movement.

4.2.1: Grievances

As mentioned in previous chapters, grievances that arise due to ethnic stacking play a big role in motivating out-group soldiers and officers to *want* to defect during a civil uprising. Chapter Three gave a brief introduction to the nature of these grievances when it comes to the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military. Due to the lack of primary sources, this section presents reports from secondary sources, which are also quite limited, of out-group soldiers and officers during the time of Hafez al-Assad in order to better understand their grievances.

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[173] Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2011), 114.

When Hafez al-Assad came to power and institutionalized the practice that was set in motion with the Baath Party's rise to power, where the Alawites would 'automatically' occupy the higher ranks of the military, he did so at the expense of the Sunni majority. As discussed in Chapter Three, the Sunni soldiers of the Syrian military were not given the same benefits, positions, or even the respect that the Alawites enjoyed. "Sunni Moslems protested that their people were being excluded from officer candidate school, intelligence services, and other elite wings of the military"[174]. The Sunnis in the military found themselves always ending up at the bottom of the military hierarchy. Even the Sunnis who managed to climb their way to the top of the ladder and secure a higher ranking within the military, they were still subordinate to the Alawites. This 'higher ranking' they were sometimes given was basically an empty title. According to Hanna Batatu's research on the Syrian military, there were indeed several Sunnis in the officer corps under the rule of Hafez al-Assad; however, "if they [were] important, they [were] important not as a group but as individuals and more in the professional than in the political sense"[175]. In simpler terms, the Sunnis, even the high-ranking officers, had no say in the decisions being made. They were only 'awarded' this higher rank, as mentioned in Chapter Three, to maintain the illusion that the Syrian military is an all-inclusive force and to appease the Sunni majority. According to Saleh 'Adaymah, a Alawite friend of Rifaat al-Assad, Hafez's brother, writing about Mostafa Tlass, one of the few Sunnis given a high rank in the military, "Tlass is in the army but at the same time seems as if he is not of the army; he neither binds nor

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[174] Amy Dockser, "Syria: Assad Hangs On", *Harvard International Review* 6, no.4 (Jan/Feb 1982): 29.
[175] Hanna Batatu, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance", *Middle East Journal* 35, no.3 (1981): 343.

loosens and has no role other than that of the tail of the beast"[176]. This shows how despite Tlass's

higher ranking, and him being in al-Assad's inner circle, he had no legitimate power or influence

of his own. Another prominent example is Hikmat al-Shihabi, a Sunni military officer who

served as chief of staff from 1974-1998. According to Batatu's research, "according to well-

informed Syrians, [however], when it came to moving any Syrian military unit of any important

size, the key figure was not Shihabi but Ali Aslan, the Alawite first deputy chief of staff for

operations"[177]. Again, this reinforces the idea that Sunnis in the military, despite being given

high ranking positions, are powerless. The ones really in control, dictating courses of actions and

making decisions, are the Alawites.

The apparent favoritism of Alawites and "the spread of confessionalism within the military

appalled many Sunnis, inflaming their fear of Alawi sectarianism"[178]. This policy of sectarian

stacking was "not so popular with many Syrians, especially those who by religion and family

status – primarily urban Sunni Muslims – once had guaranteed access to jobs and power. It

clearly grates on the Sunnis to be subordinate to members of social group that only a few

decades ago occupied the lowest level in Syrian society"[179]. Sunni subordination to the Alawites

in the military, and the security apparatus in general, was clear, and was becoming more

pronounced throughout the years of al-Assad's reign. It is estimated that by 1977, 18 of the 25

Syrian army commands were held by Alawites[180]. This shows how Alawite 'domination' of the

higher ranks of the military barely left any room for the out-group soldiers and officers to rise up

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[176] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 227.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Yahya Sadowski, "Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria", *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no.4 (1987): 450.
[179] John Devlin, "Syria: Consistency at Home and Abroad", *Current History* 85, no.508 (1986): 68.
[180] Amy Dockser, "Syria: Assad Hangs On", *Harvard International Review* 6, no.4 (Jan/Feb 1982): 29.

the ranks. Other than being denied the higher ranks in the military, they were also denied many of the privileges awarded to the Alawites. For example, "in the 1970s and 1980s, the state erected hundreds of enclosed military housing complexes to provide free housing to thousands of military officers – almost entirely Alawites – and their families"[181]. This provides insight to the extent of the marginalization of the Sunnis in the military in comparison to the Alawites.

Grievances are powerful motivators for soldiers and officers to exhibit disloyal behavior, or in the case of this thesis, to defect. The grievances of the Sunni soldiers and officers of the Syrian military were very much present under the reign of Hafez al-Assad. In his attempt to coup-proof the Syrian military, he neglected the Sunnis of the military, the out-group soldiers and officers. By playing favorites with the Alawites, awarding them with benefits, power, and status, al-Assad invoked feelings of resentment from the Sunni soldiers and officers who came to know that no matter how hard they tried they would always be seen as the out-group, they would always be playing second fiddle to the Alawites.

4.2.2: Perception of the Civil Uprising

With the brief analysis of the grievances harbored by out-group Sunni soldiers and officers, it could be said that these soldiers and officers would *want* to defect in the case of a civil uprising. However, since grievances do not automatically translate into defection without a reduction in the risk involved with such an action, the analysis of the nature of the 1982 uprising is essential. This section will analyze the nature of the 1982 civil uprising itself, and how it was perceived as

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[181] Stephen Starr, "Shabiha Militias and the Destruction of Syria", *CTC Sentinel* 5, no.11-12 (2012): 13.

a result, in an attempt to explain why defections of out-group soldiers and officers did not occur, or if they did occur, they were limited in scope.

The uprising of 1982 possessed several 'elements' that made it seem as though it would fail and that the regime of Hafez al-Assad would endure; thus, hindering the defection of the out-group soldiers and officers. First, the uprising that was called for by Umar Jawwad, the local commander of the Brotherhood, failed to garner the huge base of support needed to bring down al-Assad. When Jawwad gave the order for a general uprising, many Islamists joined; however, that was about it, "no mass demonstrations commenced"[182]. The Brotherhood's movement was localized, where mass unrest did not spread to the rest of the Syrian cities. The movement only appealed to a very small fraction of the Syrian population. As mentioned early on in this chapter, the majority of the Sunni population in Syria did not support the Muslim Brotherhood, in general, or their movement. Thus, when the time came, they did not rally behind them or support their cause. As a result, the uprising was not capable of presenting itself as a legitimate threat to the regime. As mentioned in Chapter Two, numbers matter when trying to bring down a dictator, and for Hafez al-Assad the numbers of the Brotherhood and their followers were not enough. In addition, the opposition itself was heavily divided. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood "was apparently too weakened and disorganized to set in motion a wave of mass protests and attacks throughout Syria in support of their fellow fighters in Hama"[183]. According to the testimony of Abu Musab al-Suri, a prominent figure of the Fighting Vanguard, "the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood was side-tracked by marginal conflicts and spent a lot of time and effort jockeying

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[182] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 15.
[183] Ibid.

for positions instead of concentrating all of their resources on winning the battle"[184]. This internal fragmentation of the organization ruined its chances at being perceived as a serious enough threat to bring down the regime al-Assad.

Another element that the uprising of 1982 possessed which contributed to the perception that it would fail, was the violently ideological rhetoric and mode of operation of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not to say that violent movements are doomed to fail, there are several instances over the course of history where violent movements have proven to be successful; however, in this case, the violence of the Brotherhood worked against them. "The Islamic Revolution was set in motion by a narrowly-based covert organization that carried out acts of political violence recreating the regime's sectarian violence"[185]. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, even before the uprising of 1982 the Muslim Brotherhood had been linked to many violent attacks that targeted government institutions and Alawites. This alienated many people who viewed these actions to be unjustifiable. Furthermore, the violence perpetrated by the Brotherhood over the years from 1979 until 1982 worked in favor of the regime. It gave room for the regime to use this violence and frame it in such a manner that makes it a nation-wide struggle against foreign intervention on the part of Israel and the West. Looking at several issues published over the course of 1979 and 1980 in Al-Thawra newspaper, the regime's narrative of the Muslim Brotherhood was always tied to certain words and phrases such as "Zionism"[186],

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[184] Raphael Lefevre, *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 122.
[185] Gabriel Lariviere, "The Islamic Revolution in Syria from the Rebel's Perspective", *Master's Thesis* (McGill University, 2020): 144.
[186] Al-Thawra, (23 June, 1979): 1.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1979SyriaArabic/Jun%2023%201979%2C%2028%20%الثورة%Al-Thawra%29%2C%20%235009%20%20Syria%20%28ar%29/mode/2up

"colonialism"[187], and "foreign plot by the U.S. to bring down and divide Syria"[188]. Furthermore, looking at Al-Thawra newspaper reporting on September 28 of 1980 for example, "The Muslim Brotherhood gang hires criminal and deviant elements to use them in acts of killing and sabotage in the city of Latakia"[189]. Describing the Brotherhood as a gang that associates with "drug abusers" and "rapists", as the aforementioned newspaper issue writes, further turned the public against the Brotherhood. Focusing on the events of February 1982, Jawwad's call for jihad to bring down the regime further reduced the pool of supporters to the movement. Even though the Sunnis of Syria were pro regime change, and would have preferred to replace Hafez al-Assad's minority regime, the Brotherhood's violent way of attaining the goal of regime change pushed away many potential protesters who would have otherwise rallied. In an interview conducted by one of Al-Jazeera's segments, 'Shahed Ala El Asr', with Adnan Saad al-Din, the superintendent-general of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood at the time of the massacre, Adnan was asked whether he really believed that an armed movement could bring about the downfall of a regime. His reply was "in the beginning it doesn't work, but if it grew and spread like what happened in Tunisia, [referring to the 2011 Tunisian uprising]", before being cut off by the interviewer[190]. This statement offers insight to the mentality of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time of the uprising of 1982. They believed that their movement could indeed garner the widespread support of the Syrian population in their attempt to bring down the regime; however, what they failed to

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[187] Ibid, (5 April, 1980): 1.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1980SyriaArabic/Apr%2005%201980%2C%2028%20%20الثورةAl-Thawra%29%2C%20%235257%2C%20Syria%20%28ar%29/

[188] Ibid, (23 June 1979): 1.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1979SyriaArabic/Jun%2023%201979%2C%2028%20%20الثورةAl-Thawra%29%2C%20%235009%2C%20Syria%20%28ar%29/mode/2up

[189] Ibid, (28 September 1980): 2.
https://archive.org/details/AlThawra1980SyriaArabic/Sep%2028%201980%2C%2028%20%20الثورةAl-Thawra%29%2C%20%235407%2C%20Syria%20%28ar%29/page/n1/mode/2up

[190] Adnan Saad al-Din, *interviewed by* Ahmed Mansour, *Al-Jazeera (Shahid Ala El Asr", minute: 12:53-13:09)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0T1mVCJjoI

consider and pay attention to was that their violent mode of operation was doing the exact opposite. The widespread sentiment towards the Brotherhood at the time is best highlighted in the following statement: "Syrians and diplomats say that fears of what the Muslim group would do with power are still greater than fears of Assad's government"[191]. Instead of garnering the support of the Syrian people, what the Islamist opposition did was that it terrorized them and struck fear in their hearts. While the Syrian people feared Hafez al-Assad and his repressive regime, they feared the violence of the Muslim Brotherhood even more.

It is important to note that while the aforementioned element contributed to the perception that the civil uprising would fail; thus, hindering the defection of the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers, it also hindered their defection in a different way. As mentioned in Chapter Two, violent movements are less likely to elicit military defection due to the danger and human rights abuses associated with movements of this nature. Furthermore, with violent movements, the military is more likely to respond with violence as self-defense. When the Brotherhood instigated the violence on the night of February 2nd – 3rd of 1982, killing a military patrol unit in the process, it was clear that the Brotherhood's violent actions had no limits, no boundaries. As a result, according to Patrick Seale, "every party worker, every paratrooper sent to Hama knew that this time Islamic militancy had to be torn out of the city, whatever the cost"[192]. The threat that the Muslim Brotherhood came to pose not only to the regime, but also to the Syrian population as a whole, failed to 'attract' potential defectors to their cause. The Brotherhood's violent mode of operation failed to play on the ethical and moral considerations of the troops ordered to repress.

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[191] Elaine Carey, "Syrian Regime Stands – Despite Violent Shaking by Hama Uprising", *The Christian Science Monitor* (February 16, 1982).
[192] Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988): 333.

On the contrary, the Brotherhood's violence emboldened the military personnel to utilize force and crush the movement.

One final element that the uprising of 1982 possessed that fed into the perception that it would fail to bring about the collapse of the regime of al-Assad was the reaction, or lack thereof, of the international community. First, "none of the MB's regional allies, such as Iraq and Jordan, did anything to come to their rescue"[193]. The Muslim Brotherhood members fighting on the ground in Hama in 1982 were completely alone, lacking any kind of regional or even international support. Furthermore, "there were little or no international diplomatic measures taken against Syria as a result of the Hama massacre"[194]. As a matter of fact, according to Robert Fisk, "the Americans were very happy for al-Assad regime to crush a Muslim uprising in Hama. Nobody was complaining at all… it was a strange situation where the West and the Syrian regime were very much together at that stage"[195]. Moreover, according to Fadel Abdul Ghany, Director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, speaking on the 40th anniversary of the massacre in February 2022: "there is not even one UN document documenting the massacre and demanding that the fate of tens of thousands of victims be revealed and the perpetrators held accountable"[196]. The events of February of 1982 went by with "virtually no international reaction"[197] whatsoever, nor any kind of condemnation to the violence being perpetrated by both sides of the conflict. This

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[193] Brynjar Lia, "The Islamist Uprising in Syria, 1976-82: The History and Legacy of a Failed Revolt", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2016): 15.
[194] Ibid.
[195] "Robert Fisk Remembers Hama Massacre", *Al-Jazeera* (2012).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8dSFeWxRnI
[196] "The 40th Anniversary of the 1982 Hama Massacre Coincides with Rifaat al Assad's Return to Bashar al Assad", *Syrian Network for Human Rights* (2022): 4.
https://snhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/R220211E.pdf
[197] Ibid: 6.

strengthened the regime's position, giving it extra room to conduct whatever military operations necessary, using whatever means necessary, to crush the Islamist uprising.

The aforementioned elements that the uprising of 1982 possessed contributed to the perception that the regime of Hafez al-Assad was not going to succumb to the uprising called for by Jawwad. As a result, this hindered many out-group soldiers and officers who would have wanted to defect. To clarify the matter, the following scenario will help shed some light onto what is meant by the previous statement. A Sunni soldier, who is a member of the out-group (with all the disadvantages that comes with being a member of the out-group), harbors deeply rooted grievances due to what is perceived by him as an injustice, as discrimination. With no prospects of career advancement, and all the benefits that come along with moving up the ranks of the military, it is safe to assume that this soldier would *want* to defect. However, as also mentioned, grievances do not automatically translate into defection. This is due to the fact that defection is a crime punishable by the death penalty. As a result, this soldier contemplating defection would not act until there is a likelihood that the regime would fall. Focusing on the case of Hama 1982, recognizing that Hafez would stay in power, which would automatically mean that the uprising would be crushed and anyone associated with the uprising would be killed, this soldier would then not take such a risk. This is confirmed by the literature presented in the previous sections. No matter how underprivileged troops are, they would not defect if they believe the regime would survive in face of an uprising. As a result, this soldier would cast his grievances aside until a 'proper' opportunity presents itself.

4.3: Conclusion

This chapter presented the first of two cases that this thesis focuses on. By examining the backdrop against which the Hama massacre took place, and the chain of events that spiraled, understanding the behavior of the Syrian military, especially the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers, became an easier task. Contrary to the theories of defection analyzed in Chapter Two, the out-group soldiers and officers did not defect in the case of Hama in 1982, despite their deeply-rooted grievances and their frustration with the regime's sectarian character. This is due to, as argued in section 4.2.2 of this chapter, the nature of the uprising, its different elements, and how it was perceived as a result. With the perception that the uprising would fail and the regime would endure, the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers did not defect. As mentioned in Chapter Two, no matter how underprivileged troops are, they would not defect if they believe that a regime could withstand a civilian uprising. In the case of 1982, that was exactly the case. The chances of the regime of Hafez al-Assad falling at the time were rather small, especially to the Brotherhood's movement. With that, the out-group Sunni soldiers stuck with the regime of al-Assad and obeyed orders of repression, despite the deeply-rooted grievances they harbored.

Chapter 5 – The Syrian Civil War

This chapter presents the second case that this thesis focuses on: the Syrian civil war. It will first begin by offering a background on the existing socioeconomic and political conditions present in Syria before the uprising of 2011. This will aid in the understanding of the different factors that played a role in the eruption of the civil uprising in Dar'aa in March 2011. Furthermore, it will look at the progression of events, the regime's response to the uprising, as well as the behavior of the military. It will focus on the examination of military defections, and whether or not they took place with the spiraling of events. In addition, it will delve deeper into understanding the grievances of out-group soldiers and officers in an attempt to paint a clearer picture of the motivations behind their behavior. Finally, this chapter will attempt to answer the question of why the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military behaved the way they did in the context of 2011 by focusing on the nature of the civil uprising as being the main driver behind their behavior.

5.1: Simmering Tensions – Syria versus The Regime

Before the uprising erupted in Dar'aa in March 2011, the social, political, and economic conditions present in Syria were far from ideal. First, as previously mentioned, Syrian society is fractured, heavily divided along sectarian lines[198]. Further exacerbating this division is the fact that the minority rules over the majority. As a result of the aforementioned, the system that is put in place is designed to benefit the minority, the Alawites, at the expense of all others[199]. Many of

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[198] Muhammad Tayyab, Shahid Afridi, and Maria Hamid, "Sectarian Divide as a Cause of Protracted Conflict: A Case of Syria (2011-2018), *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 4, no.2 (2020).
[199] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East,* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 47.

the scholars who have written on Syria indicate that nepotism and patronage have always been, and continue to be, hallmarks of Syrian society and politics[200]. The advancement of those who are close to al-Assad family, and more generally of Alawites, to higher positions of power just because of shared sectarian identity, was seen by the majority who were left out as an injustice. This has led many to resent the ruling regime and its policies that were seen to be exclusionary[201].

Second, ever since the Ba'ath Party took power in 1963, Syria has been declared a state of emergency[202]. This gave the government and the security forces the freedom to conduct arbitrary and unlawful arrests, killings, and several human rights abuses without being held liable[203]. Furthermore, many freedoms were limited and restricted. For example, according to Amnesty International's report published in 2009, "freedom of expression and all forms of media remained strictly controlled by the state"[204]. It is reported that many journalists, bloggers, and publishers were arrested throughout the years since Bashar al-Assad came to power[205].

Third, from a socio-economic perspective, many Syrians were suffering. In an attempt to transform and open up the Syrian economy, Bashar al-Assad implemented several neoliberal

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[200] Yahya Sadowski, "Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria", *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, no.4 (1987).
[201] Salah Abosedra, Ali Fakih, and Nathir Haimoun, "Ethnic Divisions and the Onset of Civil Wars in Syria" *Economic Research Forum* (Working Paper no. 1382, 2020).
[202] Dina Hadad, "Human Rights in Syria: The Never-Ending Emergency", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, no.4 (2009).
[203]"Amnesty International Report 2009", *Amnesty International* (2009).
https://web.archive.org/web/20090902132608/http://thereport.amnesty.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/syria
[204] Ibid.
[205] "A Wasted Decade: Human Rights in Syria During Bashar al-Asad's First Ten Years in Power", *Human Rights Watch* (2010).
https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/16/wasted-decade/human-rights-syria-during-bashar-al-asads-first-ten-years-power

policies when he first took the reins of power in the year 2000. Such a move was meant to drive

foreign investments into Syria and encourage free trade. However, despite the positive impact

that these policies had on the overall gross domestic product (GDP)[206], they ended up

"enrich[ing] a small stratum of businessmen affiliated with the regime while increasing social

inequalities and impoverishing large sectors of society"[207]. Those who reaped the benefits of the

new policies were, of course, the Alawites. On the other hand, the majority of the population

were struggling to keep up. Making matters even worse, especially for those not benefitting from

the aforementioned policies, Syria was struck by a drought. "Starting in 2006, [however], and

lasting into 2011, Syria experienced a multi-season, multiyear period of extreme drought that

contributed to agricultural failures, economic dislocations, and population displacement"[208]. This

led to a large number of people residing in the rural areas to move to the cities. According to one

estimate, this number was about 300,000 people[209]. As a result of this influx of people into the

cities, there was a high level of urban unemployment[210]. As for those fortunate enough to have

been employed, they did not make nearly enough. According to the testimony of a Syrian woman

interviewed by BBC in 2010, public sector workers earned 250 USD a month[211], barely enough

to sustain one person let alone an entire family. According to the same source, bribery is

accepted by civil servants as a result[212]. This brings the discussion to address the corruption that

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[206] Joseph Daher, "The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction: A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development", *European University Institute* (2018).
[207] Ibid.
[208] Peter Gleick, "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria", *Weather, Climate, and Society* 6, no.3 (2014): 332.
[209] Joseph Daher, "The Political Economic Context of Syria's Reconstruction: A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development", *European University Institute* (2018).
[210] Peter Gleick, "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria", *Weather, Climate, and Society* 6, no.3 (2014): 333.
[211] "Crossing Continents: Syrian Corruption" *interview by* Lina Sinjab, (*BBC News,* minute: 6:02 ,2010). https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b00x44dx
[212] Ibid, minute: 7:11-7:16.

was rampant in Syria before the uprising erupted. According to the 2010 results offered by the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Syria's score was 2.5; indicating very high levels of corruption[213]. According to the Syrian woman interviewed by BBC, from public sector workers to government officials, bribery was a common occurrence in Syrian daily life[214]. All of these conditions served as triggers for the people of Syria to speak up and demand change.

Finally, it has to be noted that the regional context also played a very big role as well. The year of 2011 witnessed the outbreak of the Arab Spring which swept across the Middle East. Eventually, it came knocking on Syria's door, signaling its turn. As President Bashar al-Assad himself put it, "Syria is not isolated from what is happening in the Arab world. We are part of this region. We influence and are influenced by it, but at the same time we not a copy of other countries"[215]. The events that took place in Tunisia and Egypt for example, served as an inspiration for the Syrian people to speak up and voice their own grievances. This is supported by the many slogans that were adopted by the Syrian protesters, one being "it's your turn Doctor"[216], referring to al-Assad. This shows that the people of Syria were aware of what was happening around them in the region and aware of the power that they, as the people, held. President Ben Ali of Tunisia and president Mubarak of Egypt both fell to the civil uprisings of their respective nations. This played a huge role in sparking hope that Bashar al-Assad would be next in line.

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[213] "The Corruption Perception Index", *Transparency International* (2010) https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2010
[214] "Crossing Continents: Syrian Corruption", *interview by* Lina Sinjab, (*BBC News,* 2010). https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b00x44dx
[215] Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East,* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 40.
[216] Jamie Tarabay, "For Many Syrians, The Story of the War Began with Graffiti in Dara'a", *CNN* (2018).

The eruption of the Syrian civil war cannot be limited to just one cause, it would be misleading to do so. The protests in Syria were not driven by sectarianism, poverty, or corruption alone, on the contrary, "the protests of March 2011 were an outpouring of pent-up demand for justice and fairness – social, political, and economic – for an end to the daily humiliations that the Assad regime imposed on the whole of Syrian society except for a privileged few"[217]. The majority of the Syrian people were fed up with the deteriorating conditions they were forced to put up with on a daily basis, and with the successes of the Arab Spring in other countries in the Arab world, the timing was 'just right' to take action.

5.1.1: The Showdown at Dar'aa

With the deteriorating economic, social, and political conditions in Syria, and the Arab Spring being in full bloom, the people of Syria decided to take it to the streets to protest against the injustice they have been enduring for years. These protests, which first emerged in March in the southern city of Dar'aa, were triggered by the detainment and reported torture of a group of young school boys who spray painted anti-regime slogans on the walls of their school[218]. Angered by the rather extreme reaction of the regime, especially towards a group of teenagers, protesters gathered in the streets demanding the young boys' release. The demands of the people did not stop there, on the contrary, all the grievances that had been accumulated over the years finally found an outlet to be expressed. It has to be noted that these protests that erupted early on in Dar'aa were peaceful. The protesters that gathered in the streets demanding change were neither armed nor were they calling for the downfall of al-Assad. They were merely asking for

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[217] Steven Heydemann and Jihad Yazigi, "Syrian Uprising 10-year Anniversary: A Political Economy Perspective", *Brookings* (2021).
[218] "'We've Never Seen Such Horror': Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces", *Human Rights Watch* (2011).

their rights, for a chance at a better life. Despite this fact, al-Assad decided that the best way

forward, or in other words the quickest way forward, would be to utilize force in order to crush

the protests.

5.1.2: Regime's Response – Show No Mercy

With the protests growing in size and scale, al-Assad ordered the security forces to be deployed

into the streets. The security forces, heavily dominated by Alawites, did not shy away from using

tear gas and live ammunition against the protesters, on the contrary, they did so with no

hesitation resulting in many lives lost[219]. At this point the regime attempted to implement

minimal changes to give off the illusion that it has indeed listened to the demands and concerns

of the people, and is taking measures to address them. One such attempt was al-Assad's decision

to put an end to the emergency rule which had been in effect for almost 50 years[220]. However,

these superficial attempts were to no avail[221]. Over the ensuing weeks, protests spread like

wildfire all across Syria reaching Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia, and eventually Damascus[222][223].

By April, seeing that the security forces were not capable of dispersing the protesters, al-Assad

ordered that the military be rolled out using whatever means necessary to shut down the protests,

starting in Dar'aa[224]. According to Al-Ahram, tanks, helicopters, and army units were all rolled

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[219] "Syria: Security Forces Kill Dozens of Protesters", Human Rights Watch (2011)
https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/24/syria-security-forces-kill-dozens-protesters
[220] Khaled Oweis, "Syria's Assad Ends State of Emergency", *Reuters* (2011).
[221] *Al-Ahram*, (25 April 2011), 7.
https://gpa-eastview-com.libproxy.aucegypt.edu/alahram/?a=d&d=aar20110425-01.1.7&e=-------en-25--1--img-txIN----------
[222] "Syria Unleashes Force on Protesters Demanding Freedom as Unrest Spreads", *The Guardian* (2011).
[223] "Syria: Protests in Deraa, Damascus, Hama and Homs", *BBC News* (2011).
[224] Anthony Shahid, "Syria Escalates Crackdown as Tanks Go to Restive City", *The New York Times* (2011).

out, at 4:30 a.m., laying siege to the city of Dar'aa[225]. Electricity and telephone lines were cut, enforcing a complete black-out, and no one was allowed in or out of the city. All that was heard was the sound of gunshots being fired at random. According to The New York Times, up until this moment "the government has been hewing to a mix of concessions and brute force, but its actions Monday indicated that it had chosen the latter, seeking to crush a wave of dissent in virtually every province that has shaken the once uncontested rule of President Bashar al-Assad"[226]. However, what was meant to be a 'quick fix' for al-Assad to restore 'peace' to Syria, ended up being the beginning of a civil war that would stretch on until this day.

5.2: Military Defections

With the analysis of the different factors that played a role in triggering the uprising in March of 2011, and of the regime's response to the uprising, the examination of the Syrian military's behavior is crucial. Many sources point to how the Syrian military is one of the main reasons why al-Assad is still standing till this day. In the words of William C. Taylor for example, the Syrian military's "fervent support" of al-Assad has been, and continues to be, truly remarkable[227]. This is true in the sense that al-Assad has managed to preserve the loyalty of the in-group soldiers and officers, the Alawites. Twelve years have passed since the uprising first erupted, and al-Assad still has the loyalty of those sharing the same sectarian identity as him. This is partly due to the fact that "Alawite officers who control the military are unlikely to

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[225] Al-Ahram, (26 April 2011), 7.
https://gpa-eastview-com.libproxy.aucegypt.edu/alahram/?a=d&d=aar20110426-01.1.7&e=-------en-25--1--img-txIN----------

[226] Anthony Shahid, "Syria Escalates Crackdown as Tanks Go to Restive City", *The New York Times* (2011).

[227] William Taylor, *Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings and the Future of Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East: Analysis from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria*, Chapter 5, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

oppose Assad since their fate is tied to his. If Assad is deposed, Alawite dominance and privilege are likely to be lost, too"[228]. This has to do with, as discussed in Chapter Two, the coup-proofing strategy of sectarian stacking. However, delving deeper into the more intricate details of the reality of the situation, the same could not be said about the out-group soldiers and officers, the Sunnis.

Minor defections from the Syrian military started taking place as early as April, when the military was first deployed to lay siege to the city of Dar'aa[229]. The events that took place over the course of the siege, especially the violence of the regime forces against peaceful civilians, sparked the first military defections amongst out-group Sunni soldiers. At this point, the reported scope of defections was minimal, with defections happening individually and only amongst the lower ranks of the military. However, "what started as a trickle turned into a deluge of volunteers"[230]. The number of defectors kept increasing the more the attacks carried out by regime forces intensified[231]. The situation began to change in June with the announcement of the first defectors group. On the 9th of June 2011, Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush of the Syrian military, alongside 150 soldiers, publicly declared his defection from the 11th Battalion in Idlib, and announced the formation of the Free Officers Movement (FOM), also known as the Free Officers Brigade[232]. In his statement, Harmoush said "I defected from the Syrian Arab Army and took responsibility for protecting civilians in Jisr al-Shoughour"[233]. A high-ranking military officer announcing that he was switching sides and establishing a main defectors group

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[228] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 344.
[229] Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand" *Brookings* (2016): 4.
[230] David Phillips, *Frontline Syria: From Revolution to Proxy War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 37.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand" *Brookings* (2016): 5.
[233] Rania Abouzeid, "The Soldier Who Gave Up on Assad to Protect Syria's People", *TIME* (2011).

was huge. In a way, Harmoush's actions 'got the ball rolling' in terms of the organization of formal armed resistance. This is highlighted in the following course of events. On July 29, 2011, Riad al-Asaad, a Colonel who had defected from the Syrian air force earlier that month, announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This newly established Free Syrian Army vowed to bring down al-Assad's government and to protect the civilians who were being heavily and brutally attacked by forces still loyal to the regime. According to al-Asaad's statement, the FSA would "work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity to bring this regime down, protect the revolution and the country's resources, and stand in the face of the irresponsible military machine that protects the regime"[234]. According to Al-Ahram, al-Asaad also called on the "noble officers and soldiers" of the Syrian military who remain loyal to the regime to defect and join him[235].

This secular group militarized the peaceful uprising, becoming the main umbrella under which different opposition groups were formed all across Syria in the ensuing months. Despite the FSA being heavily decentralized, according to Riad Kahwaji, CEO of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis in Beirut, "we're talking about troops who know the enemy very well, because they were members of these forces… They know them by name, their culture, their habits. They know all the secrets. They are a serious threat to the regime"[236]. The FSA relied on guerilla warfare tactics to weaken the forces of the regime that were already suffering as a result of the defections that were draining their power. According to one estimate, around

[234] David Phillips, *Frontline Syria: From Revolution to Proxy War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), 37.
[235] Al-Ahram, (31 July, 2011): 7. https://gpa-eastview-com.libproxy.aucegypt.edu/alahram/?a=d&d=aar20110731-01.1.7&e=-------en-25--1--img-txIN----------
[236] Elizabeth Kennedy and Zeina Karam, "Army Defectors Threaten to Transform Syrian Uprising into Civil War", *NBC News* (2011). https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna45390188

60,000 Syrian soldiers had either defected or deserted by March 2012[237][238], "that is roughly one-fifth of the 300,000 members of the Syrian military"[239]. While this number is disputed, with many stating that the actual number was much lower, it cannot be denied that the scope of the defections was significant.

As the war stretched on and entered its second year, even the ranks of those defecting started to change. In June 2012, The New York Times reported "a recent increase in the ranks and importance of those switching sides"[240]. In July 2012, Brigadier General Manaf Tlass, a Sunni serving in the elite Republican Guard, and who comes from a powerful family whose members are a part of al-Assad's close inner circle, defected[241]. Tlass was reported to be "the highest-ranking military officer to have abandoned the regime"[242] thus far. This was a major blow to al-Assad because the picture that Tlass's defection put out to the world was that al-Assad's "inner circle was disintegrating"[243]. In December 2012, another high ranking official defected. Major General Abdul Aziz al-Shallal, chief of military police, publicly announced his defection. In his statement, al-Shallal noted that "the Syrian military has strayed from its core mission in protecting the homeland to become nothing but armed gangs that kill and destroy the cities and the villages, carrying out massacres against our innocent civilian population that came out demanding freedom and dignity"[244]. Such high-profile defections became more and more

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[237] Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand" *Brookings* (2016):
[238] Gregory Waters, "The Lion and the Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth", *Middle East Institute* (2019).
[239] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013) :344.
[240] Rod Nordland, "Latest Syrian Defectors Are from Higher Ranks", *The New York Times* (2012).
[241] Julian Borger and Martin Chulov, "Top Syrian General Defects to Turkey", *The Guardian* (2012).
[242] "Syria Rebels Hail Defection of Top General", *France24* (2012).
[243] Mariam Karouny and Oliver Holmes, "General Said to Defect from Assad Inner Circle", *Reuters* (2012).
[244] Saad Abedine, "Syrian Military Police Chief Defects to Join 'The People's Revolution'", *CNN* (2012).

common as the war dragged on, where many refused to continue to be a part of the regime's killing machine.

The reported scale of defections at the early stages of the uprising was limited, with only low-ranking out-group rank and file soldiers defecting individually. As the uprising progressed however, or in other words, as it became clearer that the people were not backing down and that they actually have a chance, things began to change where the reported number of those defecting started increasing. In addition, the ranks of the defectors started changing as well where some of the already few higher ranked out-group Sunni officers also chose to switch sides. The defections that took place starting April 2011 shook the Syrian military institution to its core. They did not shatter it completely, but they made it weaker and more vulnerable. These defections didn't shatter the Syrian military because no full unit defected altogether. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the way that the Syrian military is structured, with Alawites occupying the majority of the higher ranks, managed to keep full units from defecting. As discussed in Chapter Two, this happens due to the fact that officers and commanders are in a position that allows them to give orders to the subordinates in their units to defect. Since the majority of the officers and commanders of the Syrian military are Alawites, such an order was not given. One might point to the Sunni officers present in the Syrian military and to why they didn't give out such an order. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Sunnis who were given higher positions in the Syrian military were only given these positions as part of a façade to maintain the illusion that the military institution is an all-inclusive force. These Sunni officers did not have any real power or influence to be able to give out such an order.

5.2.1: Grievances

"Syria in 2011 [therefore] had many bases for grievances against the regime, but little room for their expression"[245]; the very same thing could very well be said about the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military. Chapter Three examined and analyzed the role that sectarian stacking played in creating deeply rooted grievances amongst the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military. This section will focus on the examination of the different statements given by the soldiers and officers who defected in the context of 2011 to better understand the nature of their grievances, and why these soldiers and officers would want to defect in the first place. For the case of 2011, there are more available sources to work with than in the case of 1982; however, despite that, they are still quite limited.

The grievances of the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers of the Syrian military were plenty, mostly centered around the consequences that arise due to sectarian stacking. According to an interview by TIME magazine with Hussein Harmoush, founder of the FOM, it is reported that Harmoush had been "growing disillusioned with the military and the governing regime of President Bashar Assad for years, but like most Syrians raised on fear, he remained silent…The Sunni Muslim [referring to Harmoush] says officers from Assad's Alawite sect were given preference when it came to promotions and that some 85% of places in the officers' cadet corps were reserved for the President's co-religionists – the other 15% had to be shared among the rest of Syria's multisectarian and ethnic patchwork society"[246]. Such a statement draws attention to the injustice felt by out-group soldiers as a result of the military hierarchy that is brought about

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[245] Theodore McLauchlin, *Desertion: Trust and Mistrust in Civil Wars* (London: Cornell University Press, 2020), 167.
[246] Rania Abouzeid, "The Soldier Who Gave Up on Assad to Protect Syria's People", *TIME* (2011).

by sectarian stacking. In an interview conducted by CNN with Harmoush's wife, she explained his motivations more clearly. She stated that "because he [her husband] was Sunni, they stopped promoting him. They treated him badly"[247]. As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, ethnic or sectarian stacking favors one group at the expense of other groups. Thus, the Alawites in the military get to enjoy many benefits such as promotions and advancement within the ranks just because of their sectarian affiliation. Even if out-group soldiers are more hardworking, they wouldn't be awarded with the same benefits because they do not share the same sectarian identity as those in power. In a similar statement to that of Harmoush's, according to the testimony of a Major in the military who had dreamed of becoming an officer his entire life, "when I came into the army, I was disappointed. I discovered that we, as Sunnis, were considered to be third rank. The first rank was comprised of Alawis with proximity to al-Assad. The second rank was other Alawi officers and some of the minorities. The third consisted of us and the rest of the minorities"[248]. This complaint was amongst the most common grievances that out-group Sunni soldiers and officers had. According to a fighter pilot who defected from the Syrian air force "the 'Alawis have the networks it takes to get promotion and advantages of all kinds; the injustice has bothered me for 29 years"[249]. This interview was conducted in 2014, meaning that this fighter pilot has had these grievances since 1985. This highlights how deeply-rooted and serious these grievances really are.

One rather important source that should be examined when discussing the grievances of outgroup soldiers and officers, is Hicham Bou Nassif's illuminating work on the grievances of

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[247] Ivan Watson, "The Mysterious Disappearance of Hussein Harmoush", *CNN* (2011).
[248] Kjetil Selvik, "Roots of Fragmentation: The Army and Regime Survival in Syria", *CMI Insight* no.2 (2014): 5.
[249] Ibid.

Sunni officers in the Syrian military. As part of his research, Bou Nassif conducts interviews with many Syrian Sunni officers who defected in 2012 and 2013. One shared grievance reported by several defected Sunni officers he interviewed was the continuous discrimination and humiliation they faced despite their higher ranking[250]. "My interviewees bemoaned what they described as the imperative of 'putting on a permanent mask' in presence of Alawis; they repeatedly described themselves as 'second-class' and maintained that their Alawi subordinates were more influential than they in the armed forces"[251]. This statement reinforces what has been already been said in Chapter Three. Even though Sunnis were sometimes given a higher ranking in the military, their titles meant nothing, especially in the face of an Alawite. Another common grievance shared by many of those Sunni officers was the nature of the jobs they were assigned. "The only place in the air force I know of where Sunnis match, and maybe outnumber Alawis, is the Tayfour military airport, close to the borders with Iraq. This base is 90 kilometers away from Homs, deep in the desert. It is situated in one of the most desolate, godforsaken regions in Syria"[252]. Such a statement emphasizes what has been mentioned in Chapter Three. Sunnis in the military were not assigned the important tasks such as protecting the capital for example, they were sent to faraway places, tasked with strategically unimportant and mundane assignments.

To sum up, the grievances harbored by out-group soldiers and officers towards the regime were deeply-rooted. These grievances even went beyond things like not being promoted or tasked with critical assignments. According to Second-Lieutenant Mamoun Nassar who defected from the Syrian military: "I never dared to pray in my neighborhood's mosque during leave days, let alone

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[250] Hicham Bou Nassif, "'Second-Class': The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no.5 (2015).
[251] Ibid: 642.
[252] Ibid: 634.

praying during service. If an informer had seen me in the mosque, I would have been

immediately summoned to Military Security to explain why I was present at a place that could

harbor extremists and jihadis. In fact, I always avoided parking my car in the vicinity of

mosques, just to be on the safe side. I cannot overemphasize my frustration"[253]. This shows that

even the personal lives of out-group soldiers and officers were affected. This is also portrayed in

something as simple as social gatherings. Many defected Sunni officers interviewed as part of

Bou Nassif's research stated that "their Alawi superiors expect[ed] them to drink whiskey in

social events and [would] publicly mock those Sunni officers who abstain[ed] from doing so in

order to conform to the teachings of Islam"[254]. The grievances of the out-group soldiers and

officers were deeply-rooted, enough to make them *want* to defect.

5.2.2: Perception of the Civil Uprising

With the examination of the deeply-rooted grievances that out-group soldiers and officers of the

Syrian military had towards the regime, it is much easier to understand why these out-group

soldiers and officers would *want* to defect. The discrimination and humiliation that they had to

endure over the years elicited feelings of resentment towards the incumbent regime and its

discriminatory policies. However, as mentioned in previous chapters, grievances do not

automatically translate into defection. Soldiers and officers contemplating defection need to

think twice before doing so due to the immensely risky nature of such an action. As a result, the

examination of the nature of the civil uprising becomes crucial. This section will delve deeper

into the analysis of the nature of the 2011 civil uprising, and how it was perceived, in an attempt

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[253] Ibid: 640.
[254] Ibid: 641.

to answer the question of why tens of thousands of out-group soldiers and officers defected

starting 2011, as opposed to 1982.

The uprising of 2011 possessed several 'elements' that made it seem as though the uprising

would succeed and the regime of Bashar al-Assad would fall, unlike in 1982 with his father. First

and foremost, the movement that began in Dar'aa in March 2011 quickly spread to the rest of

Syria in a matter of a few weeks. This was due to the fact that it was a popular movement where

it did not just appeal to a small fraction of the population, on the contrary, it spoke to many

people all over the country. The frustration with the regime's policies and its disregard to human

rights in Dar'aa, with the arrest and torture of the young schoolboys, was shared by the majority

of the Syrian population. In the words of one scholar, "Assad the younger faces a much broader

and more determined opposition than his father ever did"[255]. The broad base of civilian support

that the movement elicited, as evident by the swarms of people gathered in the streets of Syria,

threatened the legitimacy of the ruling regime. According to an article published by The

Washington Post in March 2011, "al-Assad was facing the most serious unrest of his 11-year

tenure"[256]. The movement was powerful, loud, and it shook the al-Assad regime to its core,

something that the uprising of 1982 failed to do. While on the subject of 1982, according to

Mohamed Sarmini, a member of the Syrian National Council, "in the 1980s, it was a battle

between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government, but today [referring to the events of 2011]

the regime is battling a nationwide revolt"[257]. This highlights the stark difference between the

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[255] James Anderson, "After the Fall: What's Next for Assad and Syria?", *World Affairs* 174, no.4 (November/December 2011): 17.
[256] Leila Fadel, "Syria's Bashar al-Assad Faces Most Serious Unrest of His Tenure", *The Washington Post* (2011).
[257] "Atrocities Haunt Hama Survivors 30 Years on", *Al-Ahram* English (2012). https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsPrint/33544.aspx

two different natures of the 'other side' in 1982 and 2011. The tenacity of the 2011 uprising was further highlighted when al-Assad attempted to make some concessions to appease the people. Even though his efforts weren't enough for the Syrian people to back down, what the people did was that they 'forced the arm' of a dictator into granting them these concessions. By putting an end to the emergency rule, releasing a few political prisoners, and promising to make changes, the "mighty al-Assad" was seen as submitting to the demands of the people. This, in itself, was a huge win for the people of Syria, signaling the fact that their efforts were indeed fruitful. According to an interview conducted by Los Angeles Times in November 2011 with Ahmad al-Arabi, a former captain in the Syrian army who had defected earlier in May of that year, "the regime is falling. It has lost its legitimacy. It's just a matter of time. Its days are numbered"[258]. In a similar statement, General Mustafa al-Sheikh who defected in January of 2012 said "the army [loyal forces] will collapse during February… They [the regime] are sending in elements from the Shabiha (militia) and the Alawite sect to compensate, but the army is unable to continue more than a month"[259]. These statements reinforce the argument that the perception of the regime at the time was that it is collapsing. This is something that has neither happened in the eleven years of Bashar's rule, nor in the twenty-nine years of his father's rule. "Breaking down the wall of fear" is something that many Syrians spoke about in interviews[260][261]. The Syrian people in 2011 were letting go of the fear that had been instilled in them for forty years, and were choosing to speak up despite the brutality of regime forces.

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[258] Alexandra Sandels, "Syria Military Defectors Taking Active Role in Revolt", *Los Angeles Times* (2011).
[259] Richard Spencer, "Syria's Most Senior Defector: Assad's Army is Close to Collapse", *The Telegraph* (2012).
[260] Joe Sterling, "Daraa: The Spark that Lit the Syrian Flame", *CNN* (2012).
[261] Lauren Bohn, "Syrians Talk of a Country Held Back by Fear", *CNN* (2011).

Another element that the uprising of 2011 possessed that contributed to the perception that the regime of al-Assad would collapse, and the uprising would succeed, was the fact that it was a peaceful uprising. To reiterate, this is not to say that non-violent movements always win and violent movements always lose, on the contrary, this just means that non-violent movements are more likely to elicit the broad base of support needed to bring about change; something that was lacking in the case of 1982. This is due to many different reasons, one being, as mentioned in Chapter Two, that non-violent movements tend to convince potential protesters of their safety while violent movements tend to repel them, as in 1982. "The peaceful protesters chanting songs of freedom throughout the country [in 2011] were much more disruptive to the Ba'th regime than the Fighting Vanguard's fighters that killed 'Alawi regime officials [in 1982]"[262]. The movement of 2011 was a much bigger threat to the regime's survival than the Islamist uprising of 1982 because it managed to elicit the support of the entirety of the Syrian people, regardless of sect. This strengthened the perception that the regime was unpopular, vulnerable, and on the brink of collapse.

It is important to note here that with non-violent movements comes an added 'layer': being asked to use violence against unarmed, innocent people. This catalyst, one might say, pushes a soldier contemplating defection over the edge. Looking at Syria in 2011, the non-violent nature of the uprising that first began in Dar'aa in March 2011 was capable of enticing out-group soldiers and officers to defect by playing on their moral and ethical considerations. Many soldiers refused to take part in harming and killing the peaceful protesters. When the uprising first began, the regime attempted to manipulate the narrative by stating that the protests were actually the doing

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[262] Gabriel Lariviere, "The Islamic Revolution in Syria from the Rebel's Perspective", *Master's Thesis* (McGill University, 2020): 144.

of "terrorist groups"[263] that have infiltrated Syria, and are part of a much bigger "foreign plot"[264].

However, the regime could not keep up this fake narrative as the soldiers on the ground were

seeing a different reality. According to the testimonies of many soldiers, as soon as they saw that

this was not true, they refused to open fire; or they would open fire, shooting on the ground in

fear of being punished by their Alawite superiors, praying that their bullets wouldn't harm

anyone. Other than the fact that the protests were peaceful, the majority of the protesters

gathered in the streets were Sunni. Consequently, the out-group Sunni soldiers refused to open

fire at their own people. This is due to the fact that these soldiers "identify with the mostly Sunni

civil resisters rather than with the Alawite-dominated state. Thus, as they are given orders to

repress demonstrators, they are faced with a moral dilemma: loyalty to the regime requires them

to repress their own people. Repeatedly in interviews, many defectors have stated that they

simply could not do this"[265]. The protesters gathered in the streets included the out-group

soldiers' and officers' families and friends, making them less likely to utilize violence and more

likely to defect.

The third element that the civil uprising possessed, which contributed to the perception that the

regime might breakdown, was the momentum of the Arab Spring and the successes of the

uprisings in different parts of the Arab world. Looking at the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in

2011, the people were protesting against many of the same things that the Syrian people were

protesting against. Eventually, through persistence, they managed to bring about the downfall of

Ben Ali and Mubarak, two dictators who had been in power for decades. The same thing ended

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[263] "Syria: Defectors Describe Orders to Shoot Unarmed Protesters", *Human Rights Watch* (2011).
[264] Ibid.
[265] Sharon Nepstad, "Mutiny and Nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring Military Defections and Loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain, and Syria", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no.3 (2013): 344.

up happening in Libya with the downfall of Gaddafi in late 2011. In an interview conducted in 2012 with a soldier from the Syrian military who defected to join the FSA, the soldier was asked about his thoughts regarding the downfall of the dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. His reply was: "I was happy to see tyrants falling down anywhere in this world… Maybe if we get Bashar, we will do the same to him, or maybe more"[266].

The Syrian people were aware of what was happening around them in the region, and the hope that al-Assad would finally fall just like the dictators of Egypt, Tunisia, and later Libya, fueled the Syrian people. According to a Syrian woman interviewed by Reuters in April 2011, "there isn't anything impossible any more after Egypt and Tunisia"[267]. What the successful uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt did was that they "suggested in dramatic ways that Arab authoritarian regimes were far less solid or persistent than assumed. The demonstration effect emanating from the success of these mass mobilizations, pushing long-standing dictators out of office, helped break barriers of fear that had long sustained a widespread sense of 'ajz – an Arabic term denoting impotence, helplessness, and incapacitation"[268]. The successes of the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in toppling the regime, fed into the perception that the uprising in Syria might actually succeed in bringing down al-Assad.

One last element that the civil uprising of 2011 possessed which contributed to the perception that the regime was collapsing was the reaction of the international community. This element has several facets to it in the context of 2011. First, while Russia and Iran expressed their support for

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[266] Robert King, "Interviews with Syrian Army Defectors", *VICE* (2012).
[267] Samia Nakhoul, "Analysis: Syria's Assad Torn Between Repression and Reform", *Reuters* (2011).
[268] Reinoud Leenders, "Collective Action and Mobilization in Dar'a: An Anatomy of the Onset of Syria's Popular Uprising", *Mobilization: An International Journal* 17, no.4 (2012): 423.

al-Assad and his regime, the opposition was also gaining the support of many foreign countries, such as the US, Turkey[269], and several Gulf countries[270]. While each of these foreign countries had their own interests in mind when intervening in Syria, their intervention fed into the perception that the opposition had a fighting chance against al-Assad. Second, with the start of the uprising in March 2011, and with the brutality of regime forces, sanctions were placed against al-Assad. Placing sanctions against a repressive regime, as mentioned in Chapter Two, is meant to pressure said regime into putting a stop to the repression. "Since the uprisings began in March 2011, the U.S. government has intensely pursued calibrated sanctions to deprive the regime of the resources it needs to continue violence against civilians and to pressure the Syrian regime to allow for a democratic transition as the Syrian people demand"[271]. The United States was not the only international actor taking action against the regime of al-Assad. The European Union also followed suit shortly after that. As the repression dragged on, more and more countries started imposing sanctions against Syria as well. Third, several leaders, both Arab and non-Arab, started calling for al-Assad to step down. In his statement, President Barack Obama said "the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have run hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people… we have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside"[272]. Similarly, King Abdullah of Jordan, for example, was the first Arab leader to call for al-Assad stepping down saying: "if

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[269] Bayram Balci, "Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2012).
[270] Will Todman, "Gulf States' Policies on Syria", *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2016).
[271] "Syria Sanctions", *United States Department of State. https://www.state.gov/syria-sanctions/*
[272] "Syria Unrest: World Leaders Call for Assad to Step Down", *BBC News* (2011).

Bashar considers the interest of his country, he would step down"[273]. Lastly, besides Iran and

Lebanon's Hezbollah, al-Assad was losing support regionally. This was highlighted by the fact

that Syria's membership in the Arab League was suspended in November of 2011[274]. The Arab

League was not alone in speaking up against al-Assad's brutality. The United Nations also took a

stance, condemning the Syrian regime's multiple violations of human rights and calling for an

end to the increased violence[275]. All of these several facets fed into the perception that the regime

of al-Assad is weakening, losing its legitimacy, and that the uprising is on its way to victory.

With the perception of the uprising's success and the regime's vulnerability, which resulted from

the aforementioned characteristics of the uprising, out-group soldiers and officers who wanted to

defect were more likely to do so. This is due to the fact that if the uprising is viewed as likely to

succeed, then the chances of facing the death penalty as punishment for defecting decreases.

Soldiers defecting from the Syrian military were aware of the gravity of their actions. In an

interview with a defected soldier, he was asked what the worst moment for him was since the

civil war began. His answer was: "the most difficult I went through was when I decided to

defect. It was a mixed feeling of happiness because I was freeing myself from the slavery of the

Assad regime, and a feeling of fear for my family and what the regime could do to them,

especially because I was in the army and will be treated as a traitor if I return. Only execution

will be there for me"[276]. Similarly, according to the statement of Colonel Abdel-Farid Zakaria, a

defector from the Syrian military, "the regime considers anyone who defects from this army [the

Syrian military] as a murderer, unforgivable murderer, so they don't consider anything just to kill

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[273] Ian Black, "Syria's Assad Should Step Down, Says King Abdallah of Jordan", *The Guardian* (2011).
[274] David Batty and Jack Shenker, "Syria Suspended from Arab League", *The Guardian* (2011).
[275] United Nations Security Council, "Statement by the President of the Security Council", S/PRST/2011/16 (2011).
[276] Robert King, "Interviews with Syrian Army Defectors", *VICE* (2012).

him and his family"[277]. These statements emphasize the fact that going through with the act of defection is a serious crime, there is no turning back from it, and it takes a lot for a soldier to translate his thoughts about defection into action.
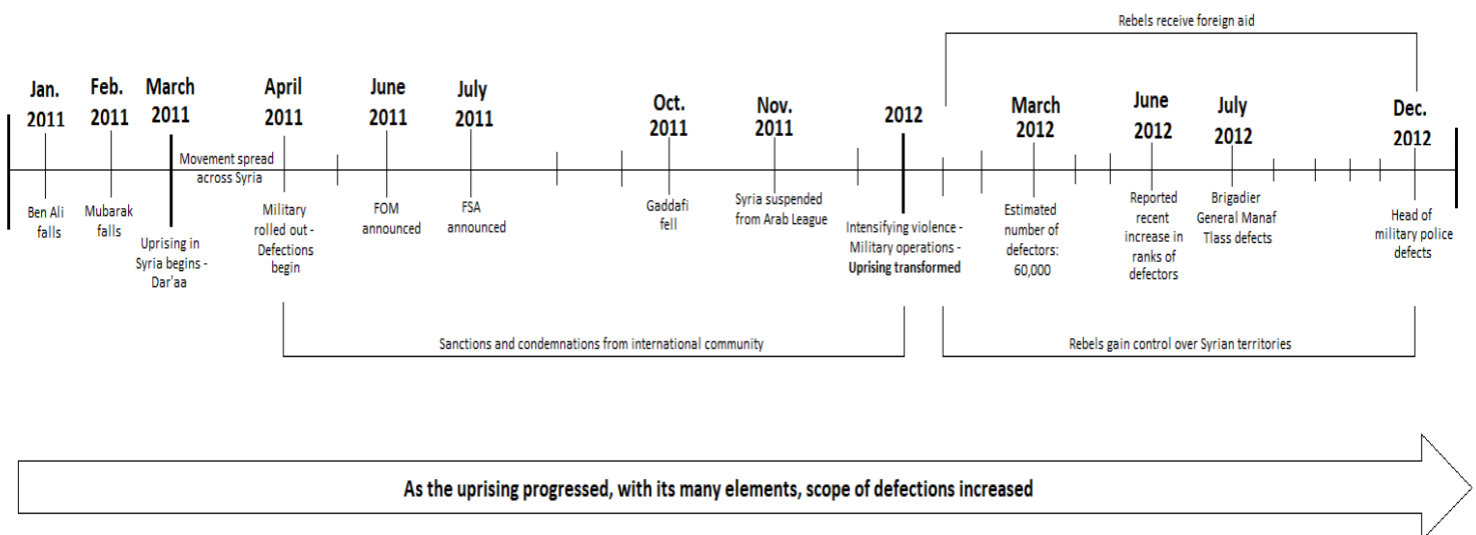
5.3: Conclusion

This chapter examined the second case that this thesis focuses on. It examined the several different factors that played a role in triggering the uprising, the regime's forceful response, as well as the chain of events that followed. This opened the door for understanding a different kind of behavior exhibited by the Syrian military, specifically the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers. As explained throughout this chapter, minor defections started taking place as early as April, when the military was first deployed to crush the uprising. Shortly after that, the scope of defection started increasing with many out-group soldiers and officers refusing to obey their orders of repression, choosing to either switch sides or run away.

As discussed in section 5.2.1 of this chapter, the out-group soldiers and officers had deeply rooted grievances, acting as powerful motivators for these men to want to defect. However, as mentioned throughout this thesis, grievances do not translate into defection without a reduction of the risk involved, or if the regime is perceived to be strong enough to stay in power. As explained in detail in section 5.2.2 of this chapter, the different elements that the uprising of 2011 possessed contributed to the perception that the uprising is likely to succeed, and the regime likely to collapse. Such a perception of the uprising presented an opportunity for out-

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[277] "Syrian Army Defector Talks to Al-Jazeera", *Al-Jazeera English* (2012). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92cFTuDHwa8

group soldiers and officers who wanted to defect to actually go ahead and do so. With that, tens of thousands of out-group soldiers and officers defected, turning their backs against the regime of al-Assad, and throwing their weight behind the opposition.

Jan. 2011	Feb. 2011	March 2011	April 2011	June 2011	July 2011	Oct. 2011	Nov. 2011	2012	March 2012	June 2012	July 2012	Dec. 2012

Movement spread across Syria

Rebels receive foreign aid

Ben Ali falls

Mubarak falls

Uprising in Syria begins - Dar'aa

Military rolled out - Defections begin

FOM announced

FSA announced

Gaddafi fell

Syria suspended from Arab League

Intensifying violence - Military operations - **Uprising transformed**

Estimated number of defectors: 60,000

Reported recent increase in ranks of defectors

Brigadier General Manaf Tlass defects

Head of military police defects

Sanctions and condemnations from international community

Rebels gain control over Syrian territories

As the uprising progressed, with its many elements, scope of defections increased

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine and explain military behavior under different contexts. It began with what seemed to be a simple and straightforward question: why did tens of thousands of out-group Sunni soldiers and officers defect from the Syrian military in 2011 but not in 1982? In other words, why did the out-group soldiers and officers act on their grievances in 2011 but not in 1982? The answer to the question however, as this research has shown, has proven to be a complicated and lengthy one.

This thesis was divided into four main chapters, each chapter serving an important purpose in answering the main question. Chapter Two presented the main key concepts of coup-proofing and ethnic or sectarian stacking in order highlight and emphasize the element of grievances. This element gave leeway to the understanding of the core of this thesis, military defection in civil uprisings. Grievances play a big role in motivating military defection during times of civil unrest; however, defections do not happen if military personnel 'believe' that the regime is unlikely to collapse. This brought in the final piece of the puzzle previously referred to in Chapter Two: the uprising in question and how it is perceived. There are several elements that make it seem as though an uprising is likely to succeed, thereby motivating military defection. This thesis focused on four main elements, nonviolence, popularity, momentum, and role of the international community, due to the noticeable role they played in the two cases examined in this thesis.

Chapter Three provided an in-depth overview of the Syrian military and how it is structured. This drew a lot on the literature presented in Chapter Two on coup-proofing and sectarian

stacking. Chapter Three illustrated sectarian stacking of the military using a real-world example. It demonstrated how sectarian stacking in the Syrian military negatively impacted the out-group soldiers and officers, giving rise to grievances. The point of grievances was the main point that Chapter Three aimed to bring forth. By understanding the structure of the Syrian military, and the grievances that arise as a consequence of such a structure, the attention is then drawn to the examination of the behavior of the out-group soldiers and officers in different contexts.

Chapters Four and Five presented the two cases that thesis focuses on. They both followed the same structure, beginning with a brief introduction to what exactly instigated the uprisings in both cases. Afterwards, the two chapters delved into investigating how the military behaved in each case. In both cases, the out-group soldiers and officers of the Syrian military had deeply-rooted grievances harbored against the regime, grievances that ultimately play a role in encouraging disloyal behavior, however, these grievances only manifested in such behavior in 2011. The two chapters then take it a step further and provide an answer to the question of why that was the case.

Placing the case of 2011 in juxtaposition to the case of 1982 opened the door for the better understanding of the behavior of the Syrian military in two different contexts. Doing so helped shed light onto the fact that defection is highly influenced by the surrounding context and by the military's perception of this context. Soldiers are human, they think before they act; hence the two different behaviors portrayed in the two cases. Thinking before acting requires understanding the immediate context, how chains of evets play out, and subsequently how they are perceived. This perception then, what soldiers and officers believe to be true in the moment,

either motivates those men to defect or deters them. Looking at the first case, the case of 1982, the uprising initiated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was violently ideological, had a small base of support, and received no international attention or support of any kind. These elements of the uprising contributed to the perception that the regime of Hafez al-Assad at the time was intact, and that the movement initiated by the Muslim Brotherhood was likely to fail. Now, for out-group soldiers and officers in the Syrian military contemplating defection, defecting at that particular moment seemed implausible. The risks in the case of 1982 were too high. As a result, based on their perception of their immediate context, the out-group Sunni soldiers and officers exhibited loyalty to the regime and crushed the uprising.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, ethnic or sectarian stacking does not allow for the expression of grievances. When the majority of the out-group Sunni soldiers stuck with the regime in 1982 and obeyed orders of repression, despite their grievances, this gave off the illusion that the coup-proofing strategy of sectarian stacking utilized by the regime worked at curbing mass defections. However, the events of 2011 came and completely shattered this illusion. In the words of Anastasiia Soboleva, "prior to 2011, there was no mass unrest that would enable broad-based personnel's defection"[278]. When presented with a what was perceived as a 'proper' opportunity, tens of thousands of the out-group soldiers and officers turned their backs against the regime and switched sides.

For the second case examined in this thesis, the case of 2011, the conditions were very different. The civil uprising that began in March of 2011 was a nation-wide revolt, amassing the support of

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[278] Anastasiia Soboleva, "When is Power-Sharing Not Enough", *Masters Thesis* (Central European University, 2021): 27.

the majority of the Syrian population. Furthermore, it was a peaceful movement, playing on the moral and ethical considerations of the soldiers ordered to open fire. The uprising was also aided with the momentum of the Arab Spring, an element that was completely lacking in the case of 1982. Lastly, the role that the international community played was significant. All of these combined contributed to the perception that the regime of Bashar al-Assad was on the brink of collapse. This perception motivated the out-group soldiers and officers with grievances to act up against the regime and defect in large numbers. This is due to the reduced risk associated with such a perception of events.

After the examination of the literature, and its application to the two cases of 1982 and 2011 Syria, we can conclude that military defection, in ethnically or sectarian stacked militaries, is best understood in terms of motive and opportunity. The motive is the deeply-rooted grievances that are harbored by the out-group soldiers and officers. The opportunity is the context, the 'belief' that the regime is weak and on the brink of collapse. Both have to be present in order for military defections to take place.

The results of this research should be considered when attempting to assess military defections during civil uprisings. Highlighting and emphasizing the impact that perception of the immediate context of an uprising has on military defection opens the door for examining cases other than Syria. The many cases of the Arab Spring for example, where in each case the military played a prominent role, could be re-examined from the lens that this research puts forth. How did the militaries of Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, just to name a few, perceive the chains of events happening in their own respective countries? Did this perception influence their behavior?

Did they have deeply-rooted grievances towards the regime? It would be beneficial to test the validity of the 'motive and opportunity' paradigm, as defined in this thesis, on other different cases. Furthermore, by showing the negative impact that coup-proofing, particularly ethnic or sectarian stacking, has on military behavior during civil uprisings allows not only for the better understanding of civil-military relations, but also opens the door for further research regarding grievances of military personnel and how these grievances play a powerful role in motivating disloyal military behavior.

From the analysis of the Syria, an argument could be made that the coup-proofing strategy of sectarian stacking utilized by both Al-Assads worked to keep them in power and secured them from being toppled in a coup d'état. As a country plagued with a long history of consecutive coups, al-Assads 'won' in this sense. However, this 'win' came at the expense of marginalizing and alienating the out-group. That was their most consequential mistake, their main weakness. Arab regimes could learn from the analysis of the case of Syria. The type of blind and unconditional military loyalty that every leader or head of state covets is something that the strategy of al-Assads succeeded at. However, seeing the mistakes of the Syrian case in marginalizing the out-group, Arab regimes would benefit more from having an 'in-group' that instead of it being based on sectarian identities, it would be based on merit and hard work. Doing so, will not only guarantee the loyalty of the 'in-group', who would still be 'privileged' in one way or the other, but it wouldn't be at the expense of the marginalization of anyone. The out-group in this case can work harder and earn their place in the in-group, instead of being cast aside and overlooked for mere ethnic or sectarian affiliations.

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